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MARY OF THE YELLOW SEA

By

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Thesis

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Mary of the Yellow Sea

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Maria del Mar is the third of five children born to a poor seventh-generation Hispanic-Indigenous family in rural southern Colorado. Maria's grandmother is a highly regarded midwife, and she herself is born with the healing gift. When she is twelve years old a gypsy reads her palm and predicts that she will soon receive a letter from the man that she will marry. Soon after the prophecy is made, Maria's beloved father, Don Antonio suffers a heart attack and is left unable to work the family ranch, part of a land grant by the Spanish crown to their ancestors. Responsibility for running the ranch falls to Maria's 15-year old brother, Ranger, but the family's survival is in doubt. Investors begin to inquire about the ranch, and Maria's mother invites one of them to visit and discuss the sale of the ranch. When he arrives she tells him he must marry one of her daughters, and though he initially focuses on fair-skinned Lourdes, the mother insists he marry Maria. Ranger strikes a deal with their father to purchase the ranch himself, thus thwarting Maria's marriage and the fulfillment of the prophecy. The family moves into town, and Maria begins to spend more time in the company of the local witch and prostitute, Chavela. Under Chavela's influence, Maria begins to explore her own burgeoning sexuality and gets pregnant. Per local custom, her illegitimate baby is given to her brother, and she sets about searching for an influential husband who will enable her to recover her baby. With Chavela's help and for the price of giving up her healing abilities, she successfully seduces her former fiancé away from Lourdes, to whom he returned, marries him, and recovers her baby, though the child is unhappy. She returns the child to her brother and sinks into a depression. To recover her spirit, she goes to live in Chimayo with an old curandero who guides her back to her healing powers, which she never lost.

Maria had three sisters and one brother, all named Maria. Her mother, Dulcinea Garcia Valdez, felt her belly harden with the first pregnancy at age fifteen, and by twenty-four had lost five children to miscarriages, two to infant illnesses, and one to an accident as a toddler—David, pobrecito, born with a mark over his eyebrow which guaranteed he wouldn't live long. They returned him to the earth nestled in a small wooden coffin alongside his ancestors, amidst the stones and frost-encrusted flowers of the hilltop town cemetery in the shadow of the shortest of the three Calvary crosses that crowned the hill. Dulcinea stayed in bed for a month after that, heartbroken with the loss and at her own childlessness. Finally, one cold morning when Antonio was already out checking the traps, she rose from their bed, lit the candles on the altar, and promised la Virgen that if the Holy Mother would let her have healthy children she would name them all Maria in her honor. She had five children in quick succession after that, and, keeping her word to Santa Maria, she named them, in order of their birth: Jose Maria, Maria de Lourdes, Maria del Mar, Maria Teresa, and just when she'd thought she was done, Maria Belen.

The Virgin didn't keep her end of the bargain entirely, however. When she was eight months pregnant with her third child, Maria del Mar, Dulcinea was shaken from sleep by the sound of a baby's wail. She cast the light from a candle around the room before she realized that the sound, rhythmic as a rocking chair, was coming from her belly. She shook Antonio's arm and sent him across the dirt road for his mother, who did not yet live with them. Nina held a sturdy hand to Dulcinea's stomach and smiled.

"It's the baby who's crying," she confirmed, looking up at the distressed faces of her son and his wife.

“What does this mean?” Dulcinea moaned. “Is the niño cursed?” She cradled her stomach mournfully. They said never to bargain with God, but she thought the Virgin, being a mother, had understood. Perhaps this was her punishment.

“Can you do anything to help, Mamá?” Antonio said, pacing the room in his long johns. “What does he need?” He gestured at his wife’s belly.

Nina sat back down on the bed and began to massage her daughter-in-law’s swollen ankles through the blankets.

“She is a *niña*, mi hitos” she said, her voice calm. “And not to worry. It’s a good sign. A great sign. Crying in the womb means she has the gift. She is a healer.”

From that night on the baby didn’t stop crying. They could hear her at all hours, and Antonio took to sleeping on the floor in the living room. They finally had to stop going to church because the wails were so loud they disrupted mass. Ranger and Lourdes pressed their mouths to their mother’s belly to call back to their little sister and tell her to hush. The crying made Dulcinea so nervous that she couldn’t concentrate on her household tasks—her shaking hands burnt dinner regularly and drove the mending needle into her own fingers so many times that Nina moved in to take over running house. What’s more, the baby, whose lungs weren’t working yet, drew on her mother’s oxygen to fuel her wailing and left Dulcinea depleted, barely able to muster breath to speak. By the eighth month of pregnancy she retreated to the bedroom and refused to leave. The sound of the baby’s wails filled the whole house, though by that point the rest of the family had adjusted their rhythms to the crying as though to a metronome.

Antonio was very proud.

“Do you hear that?” he said to his parents and cousins and the tios and tias who came to witness for themselves the crying womb. He sat on the board of the church, and they always had

visitors from town. “That’s a girl with a conquistador’s spirit. Already she’s telling the world that she’s coming.”

“She’s not a conquistador, she’s a girl,” Dulcinea corrected. “And no girl with that much to say will have an easy time of it.”

But when Maria was finally born, small and pale on a freezing winter morning, she was strangely silent. She blinked her brand-new gray eyes and pressed lips the color of raspberries tightly together.

“*Now* she shuts up,” Dulcinea said, closing her eyes.

Nina frowned, suspecting mischief, while the women who’d convened to assist in the delivery crowded around the bed to take in the newest girl in a family of girls.

“Her feet are big,” Dulcinea’s sister-in-law Luz said, poking at the little bundles of toes. “Pobrecita.”

“She’s very white,” Dulcinea’s stepmother, Alfega said. She pushed her chin in the air like rich people did. “Who would have thought *you* could have such a white baby.”

“Her color will come in,” Nina said. “Give her time. Anda, out with all of you, you’re in the way.” She snapped her fingers at the two other women and sent them out to the living room to wait with the men. Then she raised a warm rag to Dulcinea’s forehead and pressed her knuckles to the baby’s cheek, where roses were starting to bloom. She eyed the baby closely.

“Something is wrong. She has a fever,” Nina said. “Better to keep that jealous woman away from her.”

Dulcinea gladly let Nina take the child from her arms.

Nina cooed at the baby and smoothed the thick black hair that already coated her head. She bundled her tighter in the blanket to sweat the fever out. Then came a cough, rough like an old man’s, that rattled the baby’s chest and shook her body.

“Mierda,” Nina muttered. She laid her in the basinet and fished an egg out of her apron pocket. She ran it over Maria’s body, up and down her legs and over her stomach, whispered a Hail Mary, and then cracked it into a cup of water on the nightstand. The yolk floated to the bottom and the white rose to the top and solidified.

“What is it?” Dulcinea called from the bed, craning her neck. “What is wrong with her?”

“See?” Nina said, holding up the cup. “The clara has formed into the shape of an eye. It’s mal de ojo, from that jealous woman.” She called Antonio and told him to take the egg into the yard and bury it deep enough in the dirt so a dog wouldn’t dig it up. He shook his head but carried it outside.

As the hours passed the fever climbed. Dulcinea slept hard, but Nina, tight with worry, stayed up the whole night wiping warm rags soaked in vinegar across the baby’s body, down her left arm, across her stomach to her right leg, up her left leg across to her right arm, behind her neck and over her head and back down again, drawing crosses over her body to pull the fever out.

When at last the night’s blackness began to lift and the first fingers of orange burst from behind the mountain range, Nina touched her hand to the baby’s forehead and felt that it was cool. The infant opened her eyes and grabbed on to Nina’s arm, and though she would be smaller and frailer than her sisters and plagued by cough throughout her childhood, nieta and Nina were close after that night. In a sign of their gratitude, Antonio and Dulcinea named Nina the baby’s madrina, giving her the honor of choosing the child’s name, with the stipulation of course that it include Maria.

Nina made an exception and attended the baptismal mass, warning away any lectures about her lack of church attendance with a stern look at the priest, who made sure to avoid her.

“Her name will be Maria del Mar Rosalba Valdez,” she said, as the priest poured holy water over her head, and the family nodded in approval. It was a good name: the holy patroness of sea-

faring men, of their conquistador ancestors who had crossed oceans and land to come to the valley and build homes made of mud beneath the Sangre de Cristo mountains.

Nina kept the little girl with her as she grew, taking her along when she went to deliver babies and teaching her the ways of plants and healing, what ailments fresh-picked bundles of rue, romero and cenizo could cure, how to mix chopped onion with sugar to treat a cough, and why and when a hot cup of blue corn atole could banish heartache. The first memory Maria formed was of sitting contentedly in an empty potato crate, swaddled in a yellow blanket, watching as Nina shuffled around a woman who clutched her stomach as both women moaned low folk songs. The room was the color of earth, the bed white, a wooden cross hung on the wall, and everything flickered in yellow light. Much later, when Maria would fish this first memory from the dark folds of her earliest days, it held the color of happiness.

As she grew, Maria's talents became more apparent and familiar, even to herself, though she didn't always understand them. She knew from the age of four or five that she could feel what other people felt easily, sometimes by listening to them and sometimes just by looking into their eyes. With Nina she was often around people who were feeling many things intensely: mothers giving birth, losing babies, dying themselves, or sometimes sick people with aches in their joints or illness in their stomachs. Nina would touch them and talk to them, guiding them through curaciones, but by the time Maria could speak in full sentences she could feel in her own body where they were hurting. Sometimes the pain was so strong that she had to wrap her arms around her knees, bury her face in her arms, and rock back and forth till the pain lessened. Other times, like when a woman gave birth to a healthy baby, she felt such acute joy that she thought she might burst, or, if someone lost a child, she cried inconsolably for hours, her tears soaking her clothes, like she had in the womb. Anger was the most blinding feeling that would rise in Maria suddenly, at seeing someone mistreated or an animal underfed or overworked, or always with the nuns at school, who hated the children and handed out unfair punishments for the slightest offenses. Rage flew up in her throat and choked her until she pushed it out by shouting or punching her fists into a bed or wall or desk, which always landed her deeper in trouble.

"This child feels too much," Dulcinea said. "Is she crazy or just weak? This much emotion is shameful."

But Nina watched carefully. She brought Maria to the curaciones and let the child sit next to the sick or pregnant person. Maria would climb up onto a chair and close her eyes, then sometimes double over with pain, clutching her stomach, or sometimes start sweating and grow faint.

“Once you feel it, you will know how to heal it,” Nina said. She encouraged Maria to describe what she was feeling, and then showed her how to apply the ointments or herbs they would use to treat it. When the patient began to feel better, so would Maria.

Maria was eight the first time Nina sent her to do a curación on her own. She and Lourdes were in the bedroom playing with paper dolls they had cut out from a Sears catalogue, when Nina appeared in the doorway.

“Don Ramon has been bitten by a dog. Get what you think you may need and go take care of him.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?” Maria asked. She held two dolls up between her fingers, a mother and father, both with blond hair, white smiles, and perfect red matching sweaters, their backs a mish-mash of words and cut-off images.

Nina shook her head.

“Trust your feelings,” she said. “Your body will guide you.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Lourdes whispered.

Maria laid her dolls down next to her sister’s. The flimsy paper cutouts molded themselves to the rough lumps in the dirt floor hidden beneath the rug. She stood up and brushed the dust off her knees.

“No,” she said, tsking. “You don’t know how to heal.”

“You could teach me,” Lourdes said. She also stood up.

Maria shook her head and picked up a cloth bag. She looked at her sister’s fine brown hair, so light it was almost blond, and her hazel eyes.

“You get to be pretty,” she said. “This is what I have.”

“You might be pretty one day,” Lourdes offered.

“I don’t care,” Maria said, and turned around. She went to Nina’s bedroom and looked at herself in the mirror above the dresser for a moment, at her long braids, her plain, wide face, her dark eyes, all different shades of brown. Maybe Lourdes was right. Maybe when she was older she would change and get to be beautiful, too, like the paper dolls. Until then, she would be what she was—like Nina.

She looked down at the dresser and chose a candle, a pouch of manzanilla, and a small, shriveled lemon. Then she went outside to the herb garden and collected sage, romero, and hierba buena, and from the chicken coop she took an egg. She set out along the dirt road that led into town, her heart hammering, and knocked on the door of the small adobe house where Don Ramon, who sometimes tended sheep with her father, lived. From around back a dog barked ferociously. Don Ramon’s teenage niece Consuela pulled the heavy wooden door open.

“Nina told me to come,” Maria said, looking up at the teenager, who was a head taller than her. Don Ramon’s wife, Anita, a young woman with thick black hair and two beauty marks above her lip appeared behind her niece. She frowned.

“Where is Nina?” she asked, looking behind Maria for her grandmother.

“She sent me,” Maria said.

“You’re just a little girl,” Anita said, scowling more. She wasn’t pretty when she frowned. “Is that how little Nina values my husband’s life?”

Maria felt anger rush through her. She bit her tongue and turned on her heel.

“No, wait,” Anita said. She opened the door wider. “Come in”

Maria hesitated but knew Nina would scold her if she didn’t help, so she followed them through the house to a back room. Don Ramon lay in a bed, heavy quilts over his body, his eyes closed. His forearm was wrapped with a white cloth that was stained deep red. Maria felt a stab of pain tear through her arm and winced.

“Tell me about the bite, Doña Anita,” Maria said, addressing Don Ramon’s wife respectfully. Even though she’d been rude, her husband’s condition was serious and Maria felt sympathetic to her.

“This dog showed up here the other day, some kind of mutt, and Ramon wanted to keep it,” she shook her head in frustration. “Sure enough it attacked him first chance it got. I washed the bite with water and soap but we can’t stop the bleeding.” She was pale and Maria knew that she was afraid.

“Why does he want the dog?”

“He thinks there is a thief stalking about. He is always afraid of someone stealing from him.”

They unwrapped the bandage and Maria looked at the bite. It was deep pink and blood welled immediately from the puncture wounds where the teeth had clenched. It smelled sour, like rotten milk. Maria’s arm was tingling, but something else was swirling within her, something dark and fearful. She tried to push it away. It wasn’t a feeling she’d had before, and didn’t seem connected to his arm in any way she could see. She would try to fix his arm first, and held it up closer. It was already infected. Nina stopped blood with towels soaked in coffee, but she needed something stronger to soak up this poison.

Maria went outside, Anita following, and poked around the wild shrubs that gathered near the trees. She looked for a glint of light and, spying one, moved her nose closer to the spider’s web. She carefully lifted the web and several of its cousins off the shrubs and layered the fine, sticky threads on top of each other until they were thick enough to carry without breaking. Inside, she blew on them and patted them gently onto Don Ramon’s wounded arm. Almost instantly the blood stopped running, and she felt the tingling in her own arm lessen. Something strange was still swirling within her, so she burned some sage in the room as she’d seen Nina do and told Anita to boil manzanilla and give it to Don Ramon to drink.

“It will help calm his nerves,” she said.

Anita nodded. “So you are her assistant?” she asked.

Maria shook her head. “I am a curandera, too.”

She walked home and returned to her dolls, and no one, not even Nina, asked her how it had gone.

The next day, however, Don Ramon’s niece appeared at their door.

“Please come again, Maria,” she said. “My tio is still not well. His arm isn’t bleeding, but he can’t sleep and his eyes can’t focus. It’s like he’s in a trance.”

Nina stood behind Maria, listening.

“We’ll go together this time,” she said to Maria, and they gathered their supplies and walked with Consuela the three miles to the house. Nina unwrapped the white bandages that had been tied around his arm and inspected the wound.

“Well done, hita,” she said. It was clean and had begun to scab over.

“But what did I do wrong?” Maria asked. Don Ramon lay awake in bed staring straight ahead, his face pale gray and covered with a sheen.

Nina opened her bag and began to remove the supplies.

“We need to change his bed sheets and lay him on a clean bed,” she said to Anita. To Maria she said. “He has susto—a bad fright. You fixed the wound on his flesh, but now we must attend to the wound of his spirit.”

Maria frowned. “I felt something black inside of me but I didn’t know what it was.” She sensed it again, something shadowy looming over her, making the room feel cold. It was like being awake inside of a nightmare. Her heart started to beat faster.

They helped his wife and niece, and the neighborhood women who had heard of the incident, to lift him from the bed and place clean sheets on it. Then Nina withdrew a knife and drew the sign of the cross in the air over the bed to bless it before they returned him to it. She took a bundle of cenizo and rue and brushed it up and down the man's body while murmuring a Hail Mary. Then she poured ointment from her bag into her hands and sprinkled it onto his head.

"I need you to call your own name, Ramon," Nina said. He nodded, though he still seemed semiconscious. She brushed the herbs over his head again, covered his eyes with one hand, and as he called his own name weakly she splashed the ointment over his face and shouted "Regresa!"

Maria winced and felt a gust of air rush through her. Ramon inhaled slowly and opened his eyes. This time he looked around the room and seemed to see everyone.

"Gracias a dios," Anita said, reaching for Nina's hand and gripping it tightly.

"Thank you, señora," Ramon whispered weakly. He nodded at Maria as well.

"Give him anis to drink," Nina said to Anita, gathering her things. "And tonight place the herbs in the shape of a cross beneath his pillow. That will dispel the susto for good." As they were leaving the room she stopped. "One more thing, Ramon," she said, raising a finger. "Trying to keep it out, you let the enemy in. The thing you sense prowling around is after something your young pretty wife." She jerked her chin at Anita. "It's no accident that dog showed up here. It must be put down. You should listen to your wife more, cabezón."

Ramon nodded sheepishly.

Nina and Maria walked home slowly together. Many hours had passed and it was already growing dark. Maria hadn't realized the ritual had lasted that long. They were quiet for a long time, just the sound of their feet on the dirt road. The coolness of night folded itself around them on all sides, and small creatures rustled in the grasses by the road. If Maria listened carefully she could hear the rush of the river in the distance.

She looked up at her grandmother but didn't speak. She could tell from the slope of her grandmother's shoulders and her lined face that she was tired.

"You did well using cobwebs to stop the bleeding," Nina said finally.

"I didn't know about the susto though," Maria said, looking at the ground.

"Now you do. You have to pay attention to what you're feeling. You have a gift, child."

After that, Nina began sending Maria to do curaciones on her own. At first no one objected because she was the partera Manuelita Emilia Atencio Valdez's granddaughter, but as word spread through town about Don Ramon and his dog bite, the townspeople began to open the door with increased respect for the girl with the serious face, eyes like charcoal and skin the color of piñon, who cried or shook or sweat through the healings and carried a bag nearly as heavy as her and full of a curandera's tools.

Six Sisters stood at the front of the church lunch hall rocking on their heels like a row of crows. Maria sat next to Lourdes at one of two long wooden tables and the girls watched the nuns carefully. Sister Aquinas, the hair-puller, stood at the far left. She had a white hook nose and a massive bosom beneath her heavy black habit that made her look like the washing machines in the Sears catalogues. German Sister Sarah stood beside her, flexing and unflexing her left hand as though it ached for the paddle-board she usually carried. Sweet-natured Sister Mary Hue wrung her hands beside her, looking pained at the lunchtime duty, and then there was Sister Leander, who their father called Hitler in disguise, with her mustache and her arms crossed firmly across her chest, just waiting for a child to speak or not eat the food on their plate. Next to her was Sister Jacinta, from Mexico, who didn't speak much more English than the children. Everyone knew she was at the bottom of the totem pole, and she seemed as on edge as the students. Two other nuns stood in front of the door to run interception on any escaping children: Sister Felofia, who was big as a man, and Sister Mary Sue, who smiled at all the boys and who the children called Sexy Sue. Maria watched as one classmate after another solemnly pushed their chair back from the table and, head down, carried their empty tray towards the door and held it out for inspection, shoulders shrunken and braced. The two nuns looked over it with eyebrows raised and mouths pursed, and when it was declared clean with a nod of a jowly chin, Sister Sexy Sue took the tray and the child disappeared through the door into the freedom of recess.

One last nun circled the room, her hands held behind her back. She had a handsome, manly face with a set jaw and two red arching eyebrows over small glinting eyes that narrowed and darted from child to child, suspecting tricks, prepared to catch them. Sister Red Devil. She paced the room, peering over the children's shoulders to make sure no one was taking too much pleasure in their

food. Maria and Lourdes held their breath as she passed, her black-robed body tensed like a cat stalking swallows. In an instant she leapt, seizing the narrow bones of Lucinda Reyes's wrist in her claw. Lucinda's fork went clattering to the floor.

"I saw you," Sister Red Devil hissed. "Eating with your left hand. The left hand, as we know," she said, raising her voice so the room could hear. "Belongs to Satan."

The girl cowered before her.

"What are you going to do?" Maria whispered to Lourdes, taking advantage of the distraction. She spoke in Spanish, which was a risk—the nuns were unsparing with their soap, would push it deep into your mouth until you gagged. She looked at the pile of green beans on Lourdes's plate. A similar pile moldered on her own. Both girls hated green beans.

Sister Red Devil had left Lucinda to eat with her left hand held trembling in the air and gone on to torture another child, but like an insect with antennae she sensed them whispering from across the room and raised her head. She watched them through narrowed eyes for a long minute. They both looked down at their plates until she turned away.

"I know," Lourdes said. She pulled the opening of her half-full paper milk carton wider and when no one was looking, quickly pushed the green beans into it, sending little plops of milk flying up. Maria held her breath. Lourdes pushed the lips of the carton back together and looked around. Miraculously, no one had seen her.

"You're crazy," Maria whispered, impressed at her normally timid sister's cunning. Unlike the tasteless, dry food the nuns made, milk was fresh, sweet, and cool. The children all liked it. The milk cartons went straight into the garbage by the door; the nuns never checked them.

Lourdes gave her a small smile. Then she stood up and carried her tray carefully to the door. Maria watched. The nuns, except for Sister Red Devil, usually gave Lourdes a pass. She was so pretty, looked almost white. Some even smiled at her kindly. Maria stayed still as her sister

approached the door, her small back in her blue uniform stiff and straight, her heart surely beating hard inside her little chest. Maria couldn't tell if she wanted her sister to get away with it or to get caught. There was something dark and satisfying about the idea of Lourdes being the one to be punished for once. The door nuns were leaning over, looking at her plate, nodding, and there went her sister's hand picking up the milk carton, sending it flying in an arc into the trash can. The tray went into the Sisters' hands, Lourdes moving closer to the door.

“Stop there, Maria Lourdes.”

Sister Red Devil moved through the lunchroom as though parting the sea, her nose leading the way like an arrow, her whole body tensed and hunched forward behind it as though folded into a black paper airplane.

“What is this?” she said, reaching one long arm into the trash can and withdrawing the milk carton. Gripping it in her fist, she squeezed the carton open and looked down her long white nose.

“You think you're so smart,” she said. “Throwing away God's good green beans.” She grabbed Lourdes by the arm and dragged her back to the table, pushing her down into her seat beside Maria and slamming the milk carton full of green beans in front of her. Large drops of milk splashed out onto the table. Sister Red Devil gestured with one finger to another nun for a fork.

“Eat them,” she said. “Eat your green beans.”

Lourdes looked down at the carton, a tear running down her nose and falling into the milk. She lifted the fork.

“Don't do it, Lourdes,” Maria said. She felt her face and neck flush hot, her own heart hammering.

“You too, Maria del Mar. Neither of you girls, or anyone else,” Sister Red Devil said, spinning around and pointing her claw at the room of children. “Is leaving this room until you've eaten all the food on your plate.”

With a shaking hand, Lourdes lifted the fork to her mouth and closing her eyes, chewed. Next to her, Maria set her fork down and stared at her plate.

“Don’t try me, girl,” Sister Red Devil said. “You will eat those green beans.”

Maria clenched her teeth and breathed out of her nose. She could see Lourdes trembling, lifting forkful after forkful to her mouth.

Sister Red Devil leaned in so close that her nose scraped Maria’s cheek. Her breath was hot and smelled like vinegar.

“Listen to me, Maria del Mar.” On her tongue, Maria’s name was flat and guttural, the “r’s” ground between her teeth like dry meat. “You think you’re too good for God’s food? You wish you were home, eating beans and tortilla?” She jabbed a finger into Maria’s side. “Maybe if you didn’t eat so many beans, you wouldn’t be so brown.”

Maria felt a thornbush grow inside her stomach, the spikes crawling up her throat. She stared at the tines of her fork, imagining what it would feel like to watch them sink into the nun’s bony hand. Would her blood be red, or some other, darker color?

“You’re not going anywhere until you eat those green beans. If we have to stay here all night.”

The nun straightened up and stalked away, but Maria could feel her hovering, circling. She kept her head down, her eyes on the tray, and around her she could feel and hear the other children standing up, fading out of the lunchroom, until it was filled with the hush of her own breath and the stalking footsteps of Sister Red Devil. For a while outside Maria heard the shouts and shrieks and laughter of her classmates at recess, and then those sounds faded and the lunchroom grew colder and quieter and grayer. The green beans on the plate began to darken, to curl up at the ends, and when Maria dared to peek up through her eyelashes, keeping her chin down and her head perfectly still, she could see the nun’s black shoes and the edges of her robe looming at the front of the room.

The shadows changed shape in the room, light falling across the table and then shrinking. Maria began to fall asleep, then jerked her head back up. The bones of her butt ached on the hard wooden bench, her back hurt. She heard the sounds of children again outside, gravel beneath their feet as they walked home. Her stomach growled and she wished for the warm stove at home, a cup of cinnamon coffee from Nina, a hot tortilla with butter on it. The thought made her want to cry, so she bit the inside of her cheek.

And then, like Mary Magdalene must have felt when the stone was rolled aside, she felt more than saw her father's shape fill up the doorway and heard his voice boom across the empty hall.

“Sister Reginald, what is my daughter still doing here?”

Maria's heart constricted and her eyes filled with tears, though she quickly blinked them back. She would not ruin this by crying.

Sister Red Devil stood up and turned to face Maria's father.

“Don Antonio, Maria del Mar won't eat the food the Sisters prepared for her. We cannot allow that disobedience.”

“She is a child.”

“Your daughter is here, by the good graces and charity of the Catholic church, to be educated in accordance with God's laws,” the nun said, swelling herself up even further. “Children must be taught to obey.”

“Obedience is important,” Don Antonio agreed. His accent was thick and he spoke slowly in English, but he held himself with authority. “Though only if there is a reason to expect it. Without a good reason, it is just dictatorship. And Sister Reginald, my daughter is here because I send her here.”

Maria watched the nun's face change shape. Her eyes grew harder and fiercer and blood filled her face so that it became red and then purple. No one challenged the nuns, ever. They were the wives of Christ, the handmaidens of God, untouchable.

“Sister Reginald, I am going to take my daughter home, but I want to make something clear. If my daughters behave badly in school, you have permission to discipline them, and then I want a report of what they have done and I will discipline them again, at home. But if I ever learn my daughters are disciplined without a reason—ever—the punishment that is given to them will be revisited to you. I know you are new here, Sister Reginald, but you only have to ask to learn that I am a man of my word.”

Sister Red Devil's mouth opened. Maria couldn't have been prouder of her father.

“And one more thing, to make sure we are clear: none of my daughters—not Maria del Mar or Lourdes or Teresita or Belen—ever has to eat something that they don't want to eat. If they want to throw away the whole tray of food, they will, because it is my money that is paying for their food, so it is my food, and no one—not even the Pope himself—will make me eat something I don't want to. Are we clear, Sister Reginald?”

Maria felt a pressure in her chest that felt like her lungs closing in around her heart. Sister Red Devil looked like she felt the same thing, though Maria thought her face might explode from the pressure. The nun sucked her teeth and inhaled deeply, then stepped back and held out her hand to indicate that Maria was free to leave.

Maria stood up and though she wanted to run to her father, she picked up her tray and carried it to the trash can beside Sister Red Devil and dumped the plate of green beans into the trash.

In the summer of 1939 a cold wind blew down from the mountains, signaling the approach of a fierce winter and bringing with it the Turcos' caravans. Maria was twelve, her chestnut skin suddenly stretched over long arms and legs, and sitting on the normally off-limits formal sofa between Nina and the gypsy Doña Cayetana Amaya.

The Turca had arrived in the late afternoon. Nina welcomed her in with a hug and three kisses on the cheek and then called for her granddaughters. It was Cayetana who proposed reading one of the girls' fortunes.

"Mi hitas, it's a special honor to have your palm read by a gypsy," Nina said to the girls as they lined up before the Turca.

"And a sin against God," Dulcinea muttered from across the front room where she stood by the heat of the wood-burning stove. Her flour-dusted fingers nervously kneaded the beads of an old black rosary stuffed in her apron pocket. She wished her husband would materialize right then. He would be on his way back from an all-day shift at the pearlite mine, tired and hungry, and maybe in his weariness he would finally side with her against his incorrigible mother, though it wasn't likely. She wrang her hands. Her son Ranger could stop this too, but he was out somewhere on the ranch, feeding or tending or fixing, as was his duty when her husband wasn't there. Dulcinea shook her head and flipped the tortilla with her fingers, looking back over her shoulder to the formal sofa where her daughters stood before the Turca.

"Well, introduce yourselves girls. Show some manners," she called. She at least wouldn't have them embarrassing her, not even before a gypsy.

“Buenas tardes,” Lourdes said, stepping forward and kissing the old woman on her papery cheek. Lourdes had also grown a few inches and had a newly woman-like figure of which she was both vain and shy. Her fine reddish brown hair curled out of her braid in wisps.

“That is Lourdes, the eldest,” Nina said. “And this one here is mí ahijada.” She indicated with her chin that Maria step forward.

Maria felt the Turca taking in her messy black braids, the stubborn way her lower lip, the same as her father’s, always seemed to pout, the straight eyelashes that veiled her dark eyes. Even the dirt under her fingernails she felt the Turca notice, and wished she’d washed her hands more carefully after tending herbs in the garden. If her mother saw, she would be swatted her for uncleanliness. Maria hid her hands behind her back.

The gypsy seemed to notice it all, but though her eyes lingered on Maria a moment longer, she said nothing and shifted her glance to Teresa.

“And this is Teresita, just six añitos,” Nina said.

Teresa shyly kissed the old woman on the cheek and then hid her face behind Lourdes. The new baby, Belen, whimpered from a crib in the corner of the room.

“See what the baby needs, Maria” Dulcinea called from the stove.

The Turca grabbed Maria’s wrist.

“Let Lourdes see to the baby,” she said. “Maria is the one whose fortune I’m being called to read.”

Dulcinea pursed her lips but nodded at Lourdes, who lifted the baby from her crib and rocked her on her hip. Belen, just ten months old, started to cry and reached a small hand towards Maria, but Lourdes turned her so she could see out the window and pointed at the horses.

“Sit here with us, Maria,” Cayetana said, patting the sofa beside her, between herself and Nina. “You are a good girl, right? The favorite of your grandmother?”

Maria nodded.

“Yes, you remind me of her when she was young. We were girls together, did you know? Of course your grandmother lived here in Ortiz and I came through with my people in the fall, but we’ve known each other our whole lives.”

The gypsy stroked the smooth skin of Maria’s knuckles with the rough pads of her own crooked fingers. Then the two old women turned back to each other, talking over Maria’s head. Cayetana told Nina about the journey across the pass that year and the dry winter air they expected to greet them at their winter camp south of Santa Fe.

Maria looked from one to the other. Impossible between two ancient trees to say which was older. Maria studied her grandmother’s face. It was the first face she had seen in the world and she was sure there couldn’t be any other more beautiful, the way the hard skin the color of polished wood balled-up tight and firm over the smooth bulbs of her cheekbones right before cracking like glass into a million creases around her eyes and sinking in deep lines down her cheeks like the dry-baked dirt of the ditch bed in summer. It was impossible to imagine her as young once, with thick hair coaxed into braids instead of pulled back in a tight bun and cloaked under the dignity of a shawl. Impossible to imagine her as she figured in her own stories, a free woman with a carriage and a gun, crossing the mountains and plains of Colorado delivering babies, living like a man, alongside another woman’s husband.

“Let’s see what we have here,” Cayetana said, turning to Maria’s hand with a sudden note of curiosity. She traced her fingers again across the palm, almost tickling her.

Maria fidgeted in the sofa, trying to be patient, feeling the need to ask what was happening burning up in her.

“It’s okay, Maria del Mar,” the gypsy said, smiling. “I was impatient for a lot of things too when I was a girl. But don’t you worry, a lot is coming your way to keep you busy.”

Maria looked up, surprised at being read so accurately.

“Well, hija, you are never going to be rich,” the gypsy started with.

“No special power in predicting that,” Maria’s mother said.

The gypsy peered closer at Maria’s hand. “Yes,” she said, nodding. “I see that someone is going to try to hurt you. Be very careful about who you trust, who you let into this house. Whose house you go into.”

Maria’s mother coughed. Nina lit a rolled cigarette and watched her friend carefully as Cayetana continued talking.

“Don’t take gifts from anyone,” the gypsy said, ignoring Maria’s mother. “Especially not that cousin of yours.” She cast a disparaging look in the direction of the old house on the far side of the ranch where Don Antonio’s second cousin Chavela lived alone with her three children. As far as everyone knew, Chavela had never been married, but she dressed in black like a widow and covered her long, loose hair with a black shawl. Her daughter, Luisa, was in school with Maria and Lourdes, and although the nuns didn’t like her, they were never mean to her. This exception to their usual behavior was attributed by the other children to the fact that the nuns were afraid of Luisa’s grandmother, Doña Magdalena, first cousin of Antonio’s mother and who everyone knew had crippled her oldest son Maclovio when he was just a boy in order to join a coven. Even he, now a gray-bearded man confined to an old wooden wheelchair in a shack on the outskirts of town, said that his mother had done it. They were a family of women who lived alone and who bore the children of faceless, nameless men, men who didn’t want to show their faces or perhaps had no human face to show. Maria felt a shiver of fear run down her back.

“What do we do?” Maria said. She looked from her grandmother to her mother, who were both paying attention.

“Keep your house clean,” the gypsy said calmly. “Of bad energy—jealousy, envy, fear, hate. Those energies invite more, and no one knows how to manipulate them like a bruja. Before you know it they’ll have you turned around, wanting what you don’t want, hating who you don’t hate, jealous of everyone, and afraid of all the wrong things. Keep their animals away too, especially their owls.”

“Maybe we should have the priest come,” Dulcinea said, a crease across her brow. Maria pictured Father Santos, the new Galician priest with beautiful green eyes and a lisp like what the sea must sound like, sprinkling holy water on the house and running his thumb in the shape of a cross across her forehead.

The gypsy clucked her tongue. “Your suegra right here knows more about how to fight these battles than those old men,” she said, pointing at Nina. She smiled at Maria. “And this niña has some abilities, too, I can see.”

“Am I going to die?” Maria asked. She had heard the stories of people being bewitched, how they wasted away or lost their minds or threw themselves beneath their horses.

“No,” the gypsy said. She pursed her lips and shook her head. “I see a death, but it is not yours. I think you will live to a ripe old age, like your grandmother.” She peered closer at Maria’s hand, narrowed her eyes, then lifted it up again to reexamine it in the fading dusk light. “Si, si si, that’s it, there’s no mistaking. One last thing—you are getting married.” The gypsy paused, looked over Maria’s hand to gauge her reaction. “Congratulations.”

“What?” Maria said.

“Que?” Dulcinea said, moving closer, one eye narrowed. “Maria before Lourdes?”

“I don’t know about that,” the gypsy said. “All I see is a wedding. And a letter. A letter will come soon, from the man you will marry.”

“Who’s going to write me a letter?” Maria asked. The only person she knew who wasn’t within walking distance was a tia that lived in Española that they only saw when the whole family went, once a year, to the fiestas, to sit in the park with her and her Anglo husband and eat bologna sandwiches and listen to Spanish music.

Then she thought of something else.

“Am I going to have a baby?” A secret wish she had, that she’d never told anyone, was that when the baby Jesus returned to Earth as promised, that he would come through her. She imagined herself glowing with the gift of the holy child, her belly swelling up like her mother’s had with Belen. Sometimes she prayed for it.

But before Cayetana could answer, a yapping of dogs burst from outside the window and then the rattle of truck wheels over the cattle guard and Maria knew her dad was home. Dulcinea looked up, sending a silent prayer of gratitude, though the gypsy reading had been more interesting than she’d expected. She wondered what price they’d have to pay for it. The two old ladies didn’t move, the gypsy still holding Maria’s hand. The truck headlights swung into the house, filling the room with white light, before it hummed to a stop and the lights died.

“What is this?” Don Antonio said, appraising the situation as he entered the house. He hung his hat on the hook and wiped his boots on the mat.

Maria pulled her hand back from the gypsy and went to hug her father, followed by her sisters. Don Antonio pulled Teresa up into his arms.

“Do you have anything for us, Dad?” she said. Lourdes and Maria stood by, trying to act too old for this game but still excited, expectant.

“Give your father some space, girls. Are you hungry, Dad?” Dulcinea said, nervous that dinner wasn’t ready, already preparing to blame its lateness on Nina’s antics and their inappropriate visitor.

Ignoring both his wife and the old ladies on the sofa, Antonio set Teresa down and made a show of patting the pockets of his jacket with both hands. Maria watched the stub of a finger where his ring finger had been, chopped off by a broken gear at the mine the year before. She was both disgusted and fascinated by that stub of a finger, the way it ended in a rounded brown knob of knuckle, smooth like the polished end of a drumstick bone.

“Now I thought I had something,” Antonio said, frowning, the nine fingers and the one stub spread wide across his jacket pockets. “But I must have lost it.”

“No,” Teresa cried. Lourdes and Maria looked at each other and smiled, and their father winked at them.

“Oh, but wait,” he said. “There might be something in here. Why don’t you girls check?” He handed the lunch pail he’d set by his feet to Teresa. She carried it high over to the wooden table. Her sisters followed, and Don Antonio watched them, his hands in his pockets. The room remained silent while Teresa fussed with the latch with her small fingers, until, impatient, Maria reached over her and cracked it open with her thumb and pointer finger. Lourdes jabbed her, so she stepped back again and they watched as Teresa pulled away the crumpled cloth napkins that had held their father’s lunch and uncovered, shining like a jewel in its plastic wrapper, a Little Debbie cupcake, the frosting impossibly dark and glossy, its white frosting ribbon crisp and perfect. Their father’s lunchtime dessert, saved for them. Teresa reached for it and held it up to her nose, then to her chest, cupping it like a baby. In that moment the three girls felt clearly that this was what it meant to be loved.

“Share it with your sisters, Teresa,” Antonio said, and Teresa pouted but set it back on the table, hovering nearby. Antonio turned to his wife and the old ladies.

“Doña Cayetana,” he said, nodding at her. “How nice of you to visit us. Did you fly in on your broom?”

The old gypsy smiled.

“Only you can say things like that to me, Don Antonio.”

He chuckled, then turned to his wife. “What kind of brujeria were you allowing them to do to my daughter, Mom?”

“I wasn’t,” Dulcinea protested. “It was your mother, speak to her.” She stared at Nina, her mouth in a firm line. Nina looked at Antonio and they held each other’s gaze for a minute, but there was a sparkle in Nina’s eye and she took a small drag of her cigarette, letting the smoke between her fingers dance in ribbons upward.

“Oh, well, I guess we can forgive her then,” Antonio said, cracking a smile. “Old as she is.”

“Ha,” Nina scoffed, looking at him darkly. “I should have sold *you* to the gypsies.”

“Where is dinner, Mom?” Antonio said, turning back to his wife. “I’m hungry.”

“How can I get dinner on the table all by myself?” Dulcinea said. “Your daughters are no help. You have Ranger helping you with the ranch, but here it’s just me on my own, everyone else having a good time, smoking, opening presents.”

Antonio shook his head for a moment but then turned to his daughters.

“You heard your mother, girls,” he said. “Vámonos,”

Lourdes and Teresa began taking plates and bowls out of the drawers for the table. Glancing around to make sure no one was looking, Maria dropped the Little Debbie snack into the pocket of her dress.

“I knew Chavela was trouble,” the girls’ mother said to their father after Cayetana had left and the girls and Ranger had all gone to bed.

The three sisters lay in the double bed they shared, the quilt pulled up to their chins, breathing carefully in order not to miss the voices that filtered in through their bedroom door. Their

brother, fifteen years old but impossibly grown up, a whole world apart, was already asleep in a cot next to them.

“Let’s not rush to judgements,” Antonio said. Maria imagined him sitting at the table, wrapping his tired hands in warm rags their mother soaked in boiled coffee to reduce the inflammation.

“You don’t believe her?”

“Chavela is a woman who has lived outside the fold. People make up rumors about women like that.”

“And what about her mother? No one is more bruja than Doña Magdalena.”

There was silence, and Maria could imagine her father shrugging. Where other people cowered before her and looked away, crossing themselves, he and Doña Magdalena always nodded when they passed each other in town.

“She’s a mean one, Magdalena, and meaner and uglier the older she gets. People make up rumors about women like that even more.”

“What I’ve heard sounds like more than just rumors. It’s your daughter who’s being threatened, anyways. We shouldn’t allow Chavela in the house anymore, just to be safe.”

“Next thing I won’t be allowed in my house. She hasn’t been here in years anyways. She sticks to herself over there in that old house.”

“You would joke at a time like this?”

“And she’s our daughter, Mom. You shouldn’t play favorites.”

“Look who’s talking.”

There was a long moment of silence. The girls could hear rattling, the sound of coffee being squeezed from rags. Maria imagined their mother’s hands red and wet from the hot cloth.

“Are you really worried, Mom?” Antonio’s voice was serious now, kind even. He often laughed when Dulcinea got worked up, but eventually softened if her concern was real.

“Sí. Why aren’t you more worried?”

“Alright,” Antonio said. “I don’t buy into any of this brujeria. In my book, Chavela is eccentric and immoral, and that’s her undoing. But we do know those women over the river have their meetings. And everyone knows they and the Turcos don’t like each other. We know Cayetana doesn’t like Chavela, and she likes Doña Magdalena even less. Maybe they fought over the same man when they were young. It seems just as likely to me that she was just smearing her with us, so she can come and visit as she pleases and doesn’t have to cross paths with either one of those women.”

“So you admit that they are witches!”

There was silence and Maria strained for an idea of their father’s reaction.

“I believe in the church, Mom,” he said. “That’s enough. The other matter now.”

They could hear the creak as their mother sat down at the table.

“It’s time for the girls to stay home,” she said.

“No,” he said.

“I can’t keep up with everything myself,” Dulcinea said. “Teresa can stay a few years more, but the other girls are too old. What do they need all this education for, just to change diapers?”

“I don’t want to stop going to school,” Maria whispered loudly.

“Shhh,” Lourdes said.

“I like school.”

“School is good for them,” came their father’s voice. His voice sounded tired; he’d be up again at dawn to return to the mine. “It will help them, especially with English. We can’t teach them that. They’ll have to stop soon enough.”

“They already speak enough English. I need their help around here, Dad, especially with the niña.”

“Maria helps you with the baby,” their father answered, his voice growing firmer. “The girls take care of each other. That’s enough for now.”

“Antonio,” their mother said after a moment of quiet, and Maria knew their father had won. She could picture her mother turning away to the stove, her back to him, showing her discontent carefully.

“I can’t believe you’re getting married,” Lourdes whispered through the darkness to Maria.

“Why not?” Maria said. “Did you think you’d get to be the only one.”

“I thought I’d be first. I’m older.”

“You don’t always get to be first,” Maria replied.

The room fell quiet for a long time. Maria could hear her brother’s soft breathing.

“Are you scared?” Lourdes whispered then.

Maria rolled over on her stomach and stared out at the moon through the curtains. It was large and white that night, lighting the crevices in the land, the swaying branches of the trees and their shadows. The moon is a woman, Nina was always singing, while she separated beans or stitched clothes. The moon is a woman beholden to the sun, the song goes, who shrinks and grows depending on how much light he’ll give her. So one night when she’s full and bright, and determined to keep her light, she goes down to Earth and fools the mountains into thinking she’s the sun and letting her drink from their rivers. But her cold moon lips turn the rivers to ice, which she shatters and sews into a garment of diamonds that will capture and keep the sunlight forever.

“No,” she said.

It took her a long time to fall asleep, but when she did, she dreamt of a woman who glowed like the moon and bent her mouth to the riverbeds, but in her dream the woman's thirst was warm and real, and instead of freezing them, she drank them dry.

“Tell me a story,” Maria said to Nina.

They were down by the river washing colchones. It was a bright morning in late August, one of the last before the mountain snows would seize the valley and their last chance to wash the mattresses until spring. Nina made them herself, sewing the covers by hand with fabric she had saved for and stuffing them full of wool from the sheep that she'd chosen especially for this. She cleaned them twice a year, at the beginning of the warm weather and the end of it, with the ritual of religion. Maria knew the fastest way to get a broom swatted at your head or a shoe thrown at you was to sit down in your soiled day clothes on one of Nina's beds.

They had unstitched the covers back at the house and coaxed out all the chunks of wool, which they'd set to soaking in the cajete and assorted buckets and then laid out on blankets weighed down with rocks behind the house to dry beneath the sharp white mountain sun. The covers they'd carried in baskets down to the river, humming as they'd walked, their boots churning up dirt. Maria's sisters were back at home, helping their mother with house chores, Lourdes charged with watching the wailing baby while Maria aided their grandmother. Down at the river, Maria watched Nina and then hiked her skirt up too, tying it above her knees, and then they found a spot where the water rushed enough to carry the dirt away but not so much that it would take them with it. Sinking their knees to the soft grass and dirt, it felt like praying to a more forgiving God. They each took an edge of the mattress cover and plunged it in the cold mountain water, dipping and rubbing and beating it with a rock held in the other hand, then rotating the fabric down to wash another stretch of it. They sang for a while, Nina's old songs about the baby Jesus, King David, the heavens and the saints. The sun was warm on the back of Maria's head and the lengths of cloth fanned out into the river like a bridal train. Her fingers stung from the icy water and the rock kept slipping out of her hand.

Around them the insects buzzed and hopped between the bushes and hovered over the slow-moving sheets of water, while underneath the water rushed, and everything sparkled with the yellowing light of early fall.

“What kind of story do you want?” Nina asked. She turned the fabric over in her hands. “A scary one with goats and devils? Or a love story, eh?”

She looked over at Maria and winked.

“Can you tell me the story of our family?”

“The story of our family,” Nina said. “So you want both? Muy bien.” She nodded and straightened her back, putting a knobby hand, red with cold, at the base of it and looking upwards at the blue sky. Overhead a hawk circled.

“See those straight eyelashes of yours and that thick black hair? See your brown skin?” She pointed at Maria, who looked down at her arms. “Those are from the Pueblo and Apaches that were here. They are on the reservation now, but when I was a child they still lived here, right here by the river. They had their settlements here. I still remember the tipis. Your great-great-great-great grandfather was an important Apache chief. I have a painting of him in my petaquillas with his long gray braids. Someday I will show it to you.

“So part of the story starts here, on this land, in this soil, beneath that sun.”

She looked down at the rocky dirt and grass they kneeled on.

“But those dark colors, they are from the other side too, from the Spanish and from the Moros long ago, and the gypsy and the Jew. That side of the story starts long ago, in a region far to the west in Spain, dry and expansive like Colorado, full of these same piñon trees, this same dry dirt. There are stories passed on from mother to daughter of a place with birds that fly overhead and low forests of trees that can grow out of rock. A place where people walked through the streets of their pueblos eating legs of pork and cried before the statues of Jesu Cristo and the Virgen as they were

carried through the streets, but even then it wasn't safe. There was always the eyes of a neighbor watching or the finger of a friend pointing. Jealousy is a dangerous, dangerous thing, mi hita— maybe the most dangerous.

“So they left. Maybe they went to Portugal first, it seems like they might have. But at some point they boarded one of those big ships in the ports of Spain and signed their names to the documents and sailed those many weeks or months to Nueva España, all the way to Mexico, living off dry rice and acorns and drinking their own tears for water.

“When they landed they expected to find savages, people who lived like animals, but they were amazed in Mexico to find a people with a lot of knowledge of healing plants. The Aztecs could cure things that the Spanish had never known how to cure, and they had hospitals where anyone could go for treatment. They were very caring and took care of their own, and the Spanish hadn't expected to find a civilization that was that advanced and considerate of its own. They were envious. So they tried to stamp it out.”

Nina's face darkened, and she hit the mattress cover harder with the rock she held, her knuckles white with cold.

“I spent some time in Mexico when I was younger, training with a curandero, and he told me how they destroyed many of the plants and storehouses were the Aztecs kept their herbs and remedies, the same as they had done with the Moors' centers of learning in Spain. They derided their medicine and healing knowledge as primitive, when actually it was more advanced than anywhere in the world except for what the Arabs had had.

“Well,” Nina paused and looked up at a cloud passing overhead. “Back to our family. In Mexico they stayed a generation, maybe two. But on our Spanish side, we are Extremeños, used to the horse and the plain, to extreme cold and brutal heat, to turning dirt into food and stone into

water. Our people were the original cowboys.” She tossed her hand in the air, sending drops of water flying, sparkling in the air. “The Anglos think they invented everything.”

“So even with all that conquering and destroying, our Spanish ancestors couldn’t sit long on their heels in the sunny warmth of Mexico, with the palm trees and the sea. They’d had enough sea on their journey. So one day an explorer named Juan de Oñate came around knocking, calling for people with enough hunger in their hearts and bellies and too little coins in their pockets, and our ancestors signed right up! Of course they did! Their grandfathers had packed up their lives and sailed the seas to come to a new continent, and their grandfathers before them had roamed the harsh dry stretches of Extramadura, of Sevilla, of Castilla la Mancha. So five brothers, the Valdez brothers, your ancestors, signed up for their own adventure, accompanying Oñate on horseback into the farthest northern reaches of Nueva España. They were brave men, and it was a hard journey, make no mistake. As the men travelled north, they met more groups of Indians who, like the Aztecs, had special knowledge about the land, and this time they knew their survival depended on them, especially on the women who knew how to draw food from the dry earth. And the Spanish are not like the Anglos.”

Here, Nina sighed.

“No, the Spanish didn’t—don’t—keep themselves apart from the locals like the English do, too good to mix, keeping them as slaves and nothing more. No, a Spaniard will breed with anyone, and tontos they were not. A Spaniard likes to keep his bed warm, and a wife is softer than a slave. It wasn’t kindness or charity, and they slaughtered many too, but they also mixed as they went, gaining the company of women they found or kidnapped or forcibly married—because, *mi hita, no te miento*, men are pigs and don’t forget it. Our ancestors, too, on both sides, you can be sure. One hundred fifty men and one priest and Oñate, and the women they stole and the children they bore. But our ancestors had it easy, because they made good, good friends with Oñate, drinking friends,

did you know that? Because a Valdez is strong and brave and fearless, make no mistake, but a Valdez also likes to have a cup of wine and a good laugh, too, and not just the men.”

She chuckled and winked at Maria.

“So finally after many months the brothers made it north out of Mexico and Texas, though of course it was all Nueva España then. And along the way Oñate rewarded his companions and told them they could claim the land they wanted and he would sign it over to them in the name of el Rey. And when the conquistadores got to New Mexico, so many of them, like our forefathers, from Extremadura, it reminded them so much of their homeland that they named the expanses of dirt and desert brush after the old cities: a cactus became Trujillo, a sweeping oak tree became Estancia, a gash in the side of a mountain became Jemez, and then towns grew up around them as the conquistadores settled there and married more women who bore more children, making themselves into new kings of these ancient lands

“One of the Valdez brothers stayed behind in a valley so beautiful they named it Belen—Bethlehem. Another claimed land near Albuquerque, which they named for Albuquerque, where the viceroy was from in Spain. Do you hear that, how there used to be an “r”? Already our tongues were changing, keeping the old language but reshaping it, growing lazy. It’s a Moorish word, did you know? Al-burquerque, because the Arabs are a part of this story too if you trace it back far enough. White oak, they say it means. The stories my grandmother told said that in the original Alburquerque there is one tree, tall and white and stretching branches upwards, that has been there since Spain belonged to the Moros and before that to the Romans. There is a road that cuts through there that they say is lined with silver and goes all the way to Rome.”

She closed her eyes for a moment.

“The other brothers continued north with the party,” she said after a while, as they began lifting and spreading the mattress covers over the scraggly river bushes to dry, snapping them in the

air so they caught the sky like parachutes and settled down evenly over the edges of the bush. Nina sat down by the river and padded the grass beside her for Maria. She took off her boots and stretched out her toes, brown and gnarled like cashews, and edged them gingerly into the river.

“They founded Española, a town that reminded them so much of Spain they named it for her, and that’s where one brother stayed, where your Tia Luisa still lives now. They made it the capitol in fact, until they got to Santa Fe, where the fourth brother stayed.”

She laid back on the grass and closed her eyes and Maria did the same. The sun was warm on her face and sent red and orange suns exploding across her eyelids.

“Like all the towns we know, they are doubles, duplicates, of towns in España, and Santa Fe most of all. The original Santa Fe is a small town right outside of the city of Granada, which they say is shaped like a pomegranate and so beautiful kings have cried to leave it,” Nina continued, talking with her eyes closed. “It’s where the Catholic army camped for years waiting for a moment of weakness in the sultan’s palace to attack and drive out the last remaining Sultan from his kingdom. That’s why they named it Santa Fe—the Holy Faith—and finally they had their moment. Do you know what caused the moment of weakness for the sultan, hita?”

Maria shook her head, one of her hands in her grandmother’s.

“He was the ruler but in the end he was weak like a man. He had fallen in love with one of his captives, a noblewoman named Isabel de Solis, and she converted in order to marry him and became Soraya, the Sultana. Wouldn’t you, to escape jail or death? Men are lustful and women aren’t dumb, if our survival depends on it—the key, hita, is to make sure yours doesn’t.”

“So the fourth brother, when he got to Santa Fe, claimed a portion of land there for himself—maybe for his grandparents who had been exiled, maybe to prove how Catholic he was. It was near Cordova and Chimayo, where the Holy Mother appeared. You have cousins there to this day.

“But the fifth brother, who is my great-great-great-great-great grandfather, was the wildest of all of them, and he wanted to see what was beyond the furthest reach, beyond the mountains,” Nina said, as they stood up and began to gather the dry mattress covers. “So Oñate gave him permission to claim the land as a settlement as far north as he could go, and so he came up here, to this valley and claimed his land here. Oñate was as good as his word and signed this land to him, and we still have that document, rolled up and protected in one of my petaquillas. I will show you later if you want. So that’s how it ended up, with the new capitol of Nueva España moved to Santa Fe and all these outposts dotted like stars in the crown of Spain around it. We were the furthest north, hidden in this valley between the mountains.

“It was a hard life, though,” Nina continued, as they walked home, carrying the dry covers in baskets. “This climate is harsh and the winters are very cold, and they depended on their relationships with the Pueblo and the Apaches just to survive. This time they couldn’t afford to wipe them out. So they mixed and married and made a new community of very beautiful people who looked just like you, people who spoke a new language made up of many: the Castilian of their ancestors, old Arabic and Sephardi, and the Indian languages. My great-great-great grandfather was the Spanish governor of this outpost and he married the daughter of the Apache chief and took her to live in the governor’s house in Antonito. Someday I’ll take you to see the ruins of the hacienda. Even as a little girl the adobe walls were still there, and I used to play in them. I remember running around and throwing rocks with my sisters.

“But other areas didn’t get along as peacefully with the Indians as we did,” Nina said when they were back at home. They stood looking over the chunks of wool that had been drying in the sun. Nina handed Maria a long stick and together they crouched, beating the thick wool with the sticks to wick away the last of the moisture and fluff the stuffing.

“Finally the tribes organized and pushed the Spanish down from Santa Fe, all the way to El Paso. And they kept them out for a long time! But they forgot about us up here, lost as we were and isolated here in the mountains, and here we stayed, even after the Spanish regrouped and returned. Here we’ve been, all this time, herding our sheep and pulling potatoes and quelites and crab apples out of the land and trapping furs for our blankets and warming our homes with the sun. It’s important too, that we continue to use the plants and rituals and maintain that knowledge that they haven’t been able to strip us of, try as they might. It’s a kind of resistance: to keep it, to pass it on. They tell us it’s primitive or blasphemous—that only a priest can call on God!”

She laughed.

“They try to ban it or call it brujeria and send in their doctors and priests instead. First the Spanish, now the Anglos. But this kind of resistance goes on everywhere, and usually it’s women that are leading it, hiding the knowledge in the pockets of their aprons or herb pouches or in here.”

She tapped her temple and then her chest, above her heart.

“But I thought we were pure Spanish,” Maria said. This was not the first time she’d heard parts of this story, but part of her didn’t want to believe it. “That’s what Mom and the tias always say, especially about Lourdes because of her white skin. And she has green eyes!”

Nina clucked her tongue.

“We are a mix of many things, mi hita, and it’s both complicated and something to be proud of. It’s a very revolutionary thing to be proud of who you are. Watch, as you get older, people, especially when they get any money, will say they are pure-blooded Spanish, viejo Cristiano, puro español, but there is no such thing, and they are just revealing their shame. We have the blood of conqueror and conquered in our veins, and that is a difficult thing to wrestle with. But these little herbs,” she held her apron pocket open. “Are proof, mi hita, that we have never been fully conquered.”

They turned the wool a few more times and then gathered it in a blanket that they twisted shut. The next morning Nina would begin the process of stuffing it back into the mattresses and sewing them closed for the winter.

“Be prepared though, Maria,” Nina added. “To fight back for who you are and protect what is yours. The Texans that come up, they call all of us, every brown face, Mexican, as though we are all one people lumped together, as though it makes no difference if you were Aztec or Pueblo or Ute or Apache. To them we’re all brown, and to weaken us and put themselves over us, they are trying to suggest that we don’t belong here, that *we’re* the invaders, that we came from Mexico and should go back. But we’re not Mexicans. We are *Hispanos*. Our Indian ancestors were here first and then our Spanish ancestors, long before these Texas anglos came, and we have the signature of the King of Spain to prove it. Do you want to see the land grant?”

Maria nodded.

“Ranger!” Nina called, and Maria’s brother stuck his head out from the barn behind the house.

“Take me to my petaquillas!”

At the far end of the ranch, just over the fence from the witch Chavela’s white house, there was a little house, no more than a shed with windows, where Nina stored her life’s belongings in locked trunks, her petaquillas. Maria knew that Nina loved to come here and sort through her things, and she usually made Ranger drive her and wait for her outside. She never let anyone come in with her.

“When you live as long as I have, you have many memories that you have to tend to keep alive, like a garden,” she had always said when Maria asked to join. “But if you share them, they lose a little bit of their life, like clothes lose dye when you wash them.”

Maria held her breath as they bounced along the road in the truck, Ranger at the wheel. It felt important that her grandmother was ready to bring her into the shed-house with her, to show her even one thing from the petaquillas. Ranger pulled the car up outside the little house, which had shutters that were painted a peeling blue.

“Don’t take too long, you hear?” he said, staring straight ahead from beneath the brim of his cap. “I’ve got to get back and feed the cows.”

“We’ll take as long as we want,” Nina said, pushing the truck door open. She climbed out and pulled Maria by the hand towards the house. She fished a key from her boot and opened the door. It was just one room, and dust flew upwards as fresh air rushed in behind them. Maria coughed and squeezed her eyes shut, but Nina strode forward. Trunks were stacked on all sides. There were at least eight of them. She went directly to one on the far wall, stacked on top of two beneath it.

“Help me get this one down,” she said. They lifted the trunk from both sides and set it on the floor and Nina crouched beside it to open it.

“Come here, Maria,” she said. “I’ll show you my wedding dress?”

She withdrew from the trunk a folded off-white bundle and stood to shake it loose. It draped to the floor and was simple, long sleeves cuffed in a bit of lace, a woven belt at the middle, and a ruffled white bodice that came up to a high collar.

“You can wear it someday, at your wedding,” Nina said, almost shyly. “Maybe it will bring you more happiness than it brought me.”

“What was your wedding like, Nina?” Maria asked, fingering the white fabric. It was dry and stiff with age, and it and the whole room smelled like old paper.

“There is nothing to tell,” Nina said, folding the dress back up again. “He was much older than me, and he hit me, the pendejo.”

As she spoke, she pulled doilies and pretty soaps and embroidered blankets from the trunk, unwrapping them and showing them to Maria.

“Why did you marry him?” Maria remembered the gypsy’s words about her own wedding to come. She wondered if that’s why Nina was showing her this stuff now. She remembered the old man who’d shown up on their doorstep two winters before and dropped down to one wobbly knee in front of Nina, and how Nina had lifted a booted foot to his chest and pushed him backwards with it, watching as he tumbled into the dirt.

“Viejo cochino, desgraciado,” she’d said, slamming the door on his retreating backside. “He thinks I’ll support him.” Maria had watched in awe and amusement. She’d never heard of an old woman being proposed to, or of any woman, young or old, refusing. It wasn’t usually up to them.

“I didn’t have a choice, hita. You know already how these things are done. He had some money, so my parents couldn’t refuse. I had two kids right away, and I swore that as soon as I could, I would leave him, or I’d kill him, whichever I could manage first.” She shrugged and folded the dress away.

“And then you became a midwife?”

“I was always a midwife,” Nina said, sealing the trunk and opening another one. “It is something you are born with.”

“And then you went travelling?”

“I had to support myself somehow.”

“It must have been so much fun.” Maria tried to imagine it, her grandmother young and beautiful, driving her own carriage around the rocky bends of the mountain passes.

“It was hard and dangerous,” Nina said, pulling her old pistol from its cloth wrapping. She held it up and looked at it, opened the chamber where she still kept a bullet, then handed it to Maria,

indicating that she point it at the floor. “So for a time I travelled with a Polish doctor from New York.”

“Did you love him?” Maria was surprised at herself for asking such a bold question, but something about the house felt magical, intimate, like a confessional. It felt like a place to tell secrets.

“Yes,” Nina answered, simply. “We had three children together, but then his wife called him back to New York. She came out here once and saw us working together and knew right away. She knew what it would do to his career, too, to be seen living and working with me, a Hispana. That’s what bothered her most of all.”

“Were you sad when he left?”

“It almost killed me,” Nina said.

They were both sitting on the floor, their legs folded under them. Nina took the pistol back and handed Maria a book, large and heavy. It was a Bible. Maria opened the heavy cover and inside, pressed between the cover and the first page, was a document. The writing was in ink, in Spanish, and at the bottom were several signatures and a seal. The paper was fine and yellowed.

“That’s it,” Nina said. She pointed at the bottom of the document. “That signature is what says this land is ours.”

Maria knew Nina couldn’t read, so she traced her finger beneath the fine letters.

En nombre de la Corona Católica, esta tierra es legada a don Francisco Guadalupe de Valdez y Martinez.

From outside came the sudden screech of the horn. Both Nina and Maria jumped, and Nina clutched her chest.

“Son of biché, I’m going to kill him,” she said, dropping her forehead into her hand. The horn continued, long bellows and then several short bleats. Nina clambered to her feet and threw the door open.

“Que esperes, maldito malcriado! Oye, you hear me? Que comes shité, cabron!” she hollered, shaking her fists at Ranger, who was leaning forward, his forearm on the horn, grinning wildly at her. Half his fun was in harassing his grandmother into fits of Spanglish swearing.

“Que se espere,” Nina said to Maria, turning around, shrugging. “I’ll go when I’m ready. He’s in such a rush to be a man. Wait till he finds out what a chore it is. Help me close up these trunks.”

They took their time, folding the doilies back into place and rearranging the books and objects they’d pulled out. They sealed all the trunks with their locks, and the sun was nearly down when they closed the door of the little shed behind them. Maria peeked a glance over the fence at the strange white house where Chavela lived, without a flower in the dirt or an animal in sight. What Chavela ate was anybody’s guess, but the owl must eat all the little animals, though when Maria peered into the gnarled old oak that rose up beside the house, the only other object to break up the horizon, she didn’t see those metallic orbs looking back at her.

“Bring me my vinito, will you hita?” Nina said, when they were back at home and in her bedroom. She had changed out of her dress and into her nightgown and let her long black hair out of its bun. It trailed down her back as she pulled a brush through it. Maria sat on the bed, watching her. That night they would all sleep on bundles of blankets. She loved to watch Nina let her long hair down and brush it out, how it curled slightly at the ends, still thick and shiny. How proud and vain of it Nina was. She kept a little bowl of dye in her closet that she applied to her hair every few weeks with a toothbrush, and Dulcinea’s suggestions that she cut it short like the other old ladies were met with a barrage of swearwords.

Dutifully, Maria got up and went to the wardrobe where her grandmother kept her bottle of wine. She poured a half cup of it into a little glass and carried it over to her grandmother.

“So what do you think?” Nina said as Maria set the glass down in front of her. She watched Maria in the mirror. “Did you learn all about your grandmother today? All about the españoles and my own old heart?”

“Is that really why you named me Maria del Mar?” Maria asked. “After the conquistadores and the patrona of the sea?”

Nina set her brush down and took a sip of her wine.

“No,” she said. Her eyes were deep brown, almost black, like Maria’s, but they shone with a strip of gold in the middle like the tiger’s eye stone she kept in her pockets, a gift from an old suitor. “I named you Maria del Mar because unlike most babies who sleep quietly in the salty sea, waiting to be born to begin living, you couldn’t wait. You breathed the water and turned it into song. There was no other name for you.”

“Do you think she’s really a witch?” Lourdes asked.

“I don’t know,” Maria whispered. A small, winged insect flitted in the air next to her ear, paused, then disappeared in the wind. “Maybe.”

The girls hovered behind their grandmother’s shed at the edge of the ranch, poking their noses around the side to peer across the wire fence at Chavela’s ramshackle, white-washed adobe. There wasn’t another house past it for miles, not till the next town. Even though it was mid-day on a Sunday and the air was warm enough to be outside without a jacket, the windows were firmly closed and covered by dark curtains. The windowpanes themselves were cloudy and swirled with dust, as though they hadn’t been cleaned, or opened, in years. Maybe not since the last time Maria had been this close to the house, when she’d stood on that barren gravel doorstep between Nina and Tia Elvira, each with a hand firmly, protectively, clasped on her shoulders, when they’d gone to confront Doña Magdalena.

Maria pressed her shoulder into the rough walls of the shed as she studied the house. The white-wash was peeling from the walls, revealing patches of mud, and a low, unpainted wooden fence ran around it. Though she had teenage sons, sometimes Chavela could be seen outside mending it herself, nails stuck in her teeth and her black-cloaked form bent over with a hammer, her skirt dragging in the dirt. Sometimes, when a hard winter storm was coming, Don Antonio would drive the truck out here and help her seal cracks in the walls and chop firewood for the stove. She was his second cousin, he said when Dulcinea complained, because *familia*. The ground outside was very dry and left wild, just patches of dry grass here and there and vast stretches of dirt. Maria wondered how the family ate; there wasn’t even a vegetable garden.

Aside from her sister's breathing and the few distant birds calling to each other across the midday air, a heavy silence hung around the house—no chickens clucked, no dogs barked, no children laughed or fought, and even the birdsong seemed to suspend itself just outside the fenced yard.

"We should go home," Lourdes said. "There's no one there."

"Where do you think they could be?" Maria responded, studying the motionless windows.

"Definitely not in church." Lourdes hawked a nervous laugh.

"Maybe they're sleeping. Maybe they sleep in the day so they can dance in the woods at night with the goat."

"Maybe they've turned into owls and are flying around hunting." Lourdes contributed.

"Tonta," Maria said. "Owls only hunt at night."

Lourdes made a face. "I bet Meliton and Felix are in town causing trouble," she said after a minute.

Maria thought about Chavela's teenage sons. One was tall and the other short and their hair and eyes were different colors, but both had hunched, sharp shoulders and backs so skinny and curved that you could count the knobs of their spine. They had stopped going to school years ago and loitered in front of the town's general store, leering and throwing stones at the school children as they passed. It was said they were already buying whisky. They had a way of looking at you, Maria thought, with their mean, knit-together eyes, like they hated everything that had come together to make you.

Chavela's daughter, Luisa, on the other hand, was a quiet, almost mute girl, still in school, who wore thick glasses over her plain face, which made her large, unfocused eyes look even bigger. When they were little, Luisa and Maria had been friends. They were cousins, after all, and the same age. They would walk to school together, and on warm summer days if Luisa appeared, standing

shyly at the door, and Maria's chores were done, the cousins would play school or church or nuns together in the lush thicket of trees and tall grasses that grew up around the ditch in spring and that Maria pretended was full of fairies and magic.

But one day two years before, when they were ten, both girls' great aunt Tia Elvira appeared in the driveway of the ranch house in the passenger seat of her son's car, from which she lifted herself with great dignity to rap meaty knuckles against the front door and then let herself in.

"I have a bone to pick with you about your granddaughter, Nina," Tia Elvira said. She tied her old-fashioned skirts so tight at the midsection that her hips sprang out on either side like overstuffed cushions. She powdered her wide face very white, several shades lighter than her neck, and stamped two perfect circles of pink rouge high on her cheekbones.

Nina put coffee to boil on the stove. Maria came out of the bedroom and hovered quietly beside Nina.

"My great-niece Luisa tells me that Maria has been spreading mitote about me behind my back," Tia Elvira said, addressing herself to Nina as though Maria weren't there. "You know I won't stand for this kind of disrespect. I expected more from Don Antonio's daughter."

"I see," Nina said, nodding slowly. "Maria, what do you have to say? Is it true? Have you been telling lies about your tia?"

Maria shook her head. It wasn't true. In fact, it was Luisa who often made fun of their great-aunt, sucking in her cheeks to make them look skinnier like Tia Elvira sometimes did and wrapping a stretch of cloth around her waist so tightly she could barely breathe. She couldn't understand those streaks of meanness in her quiet cousin when they surfaced, suddenly, darkly, though just as quickly they vanished back beneath the surface. It was an inexcusable thing to mock an elder and she knew Don Antonio would reach for the belt if he caught her or any of his family, including her third cousin, in the act of such disrespect. What was Luisa trying to do to her?

Tia Elvira lifted her chin and pushed her chest forward.

“She’s lying,” she said. “Everyone knows Maria is a disobedient child.”

Nina ignored this. “What things were said?” She pulled three cups out of the cupboard, reached for the sugar bowl.

Elvira looked away. “She said Maria called me—” She coughed. “Called me a fat goose, and said that I looked like a clown.”

“Well, Elvira,” Nina said, giving her a look. “Are you going to be that fussed by little girls’ nonsense? Surely not.”

“There was more,” Elvira said. She cleared her throat. “Luisa said that Maria told the other children at school that I tried to join a coven but that I was so ugly—” she faltered and tossed her head again nervously. “That even Satan wouldn’t have me as a bride, so I keep a goat in my bed and pretend he’s my husband.” She cleared her throat again. “If you know what I mean.”

Nina nodded slowly.

“Wicked, disgusting, ridiculous things of course,” Elvira said, still ignoring Maria’s presence. “And I expect an apology from her. I won’t be disrespected by my own family.”

“Of course not,” Nina said calmly. “Familia is everything.”

Maria crossed her arms, stewing silently, though she didn’t know what she would say if she were asked to speak. She’d never even heard Luisa say the things Tia Elvira had just reported; she didn’t know people who talked about, or knew, things like that.

Nina gestured to Elvira to sit at the table, poured coffee with cinnamon into her cup, and then offered her milk. While Elvira stirred her coffee indignantly, Nina sat down beside her.

“Maria is not a liar, Elvira,” Nina said. Her tone was firm. “And those things are not my Maria.”

“But—”

“I am telling you, Elvira,” Nina said. She set her own spoon down on the table and regarded Elvira evenly. “See past your own pride: whose child are you more likely to trust to speak truth? Antonio’s or Chavela’s?”

Elvira sucked her teeth.

“I think,” Nina said, looking at Maria, who was seated beside her. “That Luisa is mad at Maria and trying to cause trouble for her, and she has gone about things in the Pedragón way. It was only a matter of time before she began to act like her mother. This is, of course, how it begins. Did you girls have a fight, Maria?”

Maria shook her head.

“Did something happen that she would be mad at you for?”

Maria reddened and looked at her fingers.

“Tell us what happened.”

Maria shrugged and wouldn’t meet Nina’s eyes. “Hectór Martínez gave me an apple last week.”

“And Luisa is fond of Hectór Martínez?”

Maria nodded.

Nina flashed a look at Elvira.

“You see,” she said. She stood up. “Vamonós.”

“To where?” Elvira asked, looking surprised.

“We’re going to speak to Doña Magdalena about Luisa, all three of us. These are serious things to lie about, and you give a Pedragón woman an inch and she’ll take a mile. They are like misbehaving dogs, always testing the limits. They have to know that even they will be held accountable.”

“Oh, it’s okay, Nina. If you say Maria is telling the truth, I believe you. No one would doubt your word.”

“Are you afraid of that vieja?”

Elvira shook her head but looked away.

“They say her daughter is worse.”

Nina tsked. “Una pluma bien hecha, that one. Not one of her kids looks like the other.”

“A splinter of wood is the same as the board it came from.”

“Yes,” Nina said. She considered this, then said, with a note of softness in her voice. “All they have are tricks, Elvira. They are no threat if you can see them coming.”

Elvira’s son, Teodoro, was leaning against a tree smoking outside. Maria climbed into the front seat of the car between Nina and Elvira and they headed down the dirt road to the white house on the far end of the ranch. Elvira muttered nervously as they drove, but Nina stared straight ahead through pale, sparse eyelashes as her head bopped up and down with the road.

“Stay and wait for us here, Teodoro,” Nina said to Elvira’s son when he pulled up in front of the white house. The three got out of the car and strode to the front door, Nina holding Maria’s hand and leading the way. She knocked twice on the door.

“Go away from here, bruja,” came a voice from inside.

“You can see the mote in another’s eye and not the beam in your own?” Nina said. “Open the door, Magdalena.”

“For your own sake, you should go, Manuelita,” came the voice.

“Your house has brought this trouble on itself,” Nina responded. She rapped on the door again, several loud taps. “Enough nonsense. As though you and I were the schoolgirls. Open the door and let’s talk face to face.”

There was a moment of silence. Maria reached for her grandmother's hand again. Then, as though with a burst of wind, the door flew open, revealing the tall, gaunt form of Doña Magdalena. Even old as she was, she was striking, the way all Pedragón women were: thin and hard with shoulders like hangers, stone-like white faces, and black hair that grayed young and ran down their shoulders in tangled waves like the rapids of a river. Maria had heard from her tias and the children at school that when a Pedragón woman hugged you, thorns like barbed wire pierced your flesh. That, they said, was why the men that came around them never stayed long.

Doña Magdalena rested flinty, kohl-lined eyes on Nina and crossed her arms.

Nina didn't hesitate. "Your granddaughter Luisa has been telling lies about mi hita to cause trouble for her with Elvira. She must admit it and apologize."

From the darkness of the house behind Doña Magdalena, Maria watched the pale face of Chavela appear, as though from the depths of a lake. Skirting behind her like a shadow Maria saw Luisa, the way her hair fell straight down to her shoulders like stalks of hay, the way the sunlight glinted and froze in her glasses.

Doña Magdalena tilted her head slightly to regard Nina from the corner of her eyes.

"How dare Maria accuse Luisa of this?"

"Magdalena, you know better."

"I see no reason why your nietas's word means more than mine. And maybe the things that were said were not lies," she responded, looking at Elvira.

"Sinvergüenza!" Elvira gasped, raising a hand to her chest. "And with everyone knowing what *you* do."

"Magdalena, por dios. These words have consequences. Make Luisa apologize and we can wrap up this matter between families. Or else it may grow into something that neither you nor I can control."

“Maybe your family has escaped your control, Manuelita, but mine has not.”

“You will regret this, Magdalena.”

“The partera threatening me? You imagine yourself powerful because you pull screaming infants from women’s bellies like a horse hand does when the foals come bloody and stinking into the world. You’re not half the bruja you could be if you had the ovarios.”

“Magdalena, let these old rivalries go,” Nina said, shaking her head. She turned, a hand on both Elvira and Maria’s shoulders. “Let’s go home and leave this snake hissing on her doorstep.”

“And tell your granddaughter to stick to what’s hers,” Doña Magdalena called after them. “Just like a Valdez to think the whole world owes them everything.”

It was a few days later that Luisa showed up on their doorstep.

“My grandmother has sent this jar of jam for Maria,” she said, when Dulcinea opened the door. She blinked her eyes behind her thick frames, her face impassive. “She says the ghost of her cousin, Tio Antonio’s dad, visited her and reminded her how they used to play together as children and that we should overlook Maria’s disrespect of accusing me of lying. She offers this jam as a sign of good will.”

Dulcinea took the jar from the little girl and invited her in, but Luisa shook her head and turned away quickly, disappearing down the road.

“Feed it to the dogs,” Nina said.

“It’s good jam,” Dulcinea, who had a sweet tooth, protested. “Blackberry.”

“To the dogs,” Nina said. Dulcinea sighed and handed it to Maria, who carried it outside and dumped it into the grass. The dogs, German Shepherd mutts, circled around, sniffing it.

The next time Nina crossed paths with Doña Magdalena in town, as both women waited in line at the general store to buy sugar and coffee, Magdalena pulled Nina aside.

“I know Maria did not eat my jam,” she said. “I know you gave it to the dogs.”

“Did you take me for a fool, Magdalena?” Nina said.

“Do you think she was trying to poison you?” Lourdes asked now, as the sisters watched the motionless white house.

Maria blew at a grasshopper that had landed on the ledge of the shed’s window. “I don’t know,” she said. “The dogs didn’t die. Maybe she was trying to curse me. She’d have to get past Nina, though.”

Since then, Luisa had barely spoken to Maria in school. The girls didn’t play together anymore, and Doña Magdalena had moved to the far other side of Ortiz, into a house with her older sister. It was a strange thing for an elderly woman to move *away* from her younger daughter, especially one with children and no husband, but it was said that the two women butted heads over Chavela’s many love affairs. A Pedragón woman was not supposed to marry.

“Let’s go around the back,” Maria said.

“Nooo,” Lourdes said, drawing back. “This is close enough.”

“I want to see her,” Maria said. Maria remembered how Nina had stood her ground in front of Doña Magdalena. The Turca had said Chavela would try to do her harm. “They’re only dangerous if you don’t know their tricks,” Nina had said. Maria pushed around her sister and took a few steps towards the back end of the shed. She paused and looked back at Lourdes.

“Maria,” Lourdes said, nervously.

“Chicken,” Maria said. She crouched at the back wall and rested her hands in the dirt, leaning forward around the side of the building. She could make out part of the back yard, which was more dry grass and dirt with a clothesline strung between two trees and clothes pins dangling at odd angles, purposeless in the wind. The sky beyond was an unbroken blue wall. A small lamb

roamed the back yard, its hooves overturning stones as it nibbled at bits of dry grass. Maria felt a flash of irritation at her sister, hovering behind her when there was nothing to reward her own bravery. She drew in her breath in a gasp.

“What is it?” Lourdes said, her eyes growing wide.

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Maria whispered. The wind blew gently through the grasses, and the lamb, catching their scent, looked up at them. The clothesline swayed in the breeze. She felt her sister edge closer to her and lean her head out over the wall just above Maria’s head.

“I don’t see anything,” Lourdes said, her voice hushed.

“I wonder what she does in there all day,” Maria said, sitting back against the wall. She splayed her legs out in front of her and plucked at a bit of dry grass.

“Tonta,” Lourdes said, stepping back and swatting her in the arm. “You tricked me. There’s nothing there.”

Maria shrugged. “There could have been. You were just too slow to see it.” She scratched her fingernails up her legs, leaving long clawlike, chalky streaks. Her mother would yell at her for not putting lotion on, but she liked that she could draw designs in her own skin. She imagined these had been left by an animal or a monster who she’d escaped, who’d raked their claws down her legs as she was pulled away by Michael the Arcangel.

The crack of a door slamming startled the sisters, and they both flew back against the shed, their shoulder-blades digging into the rough walls. Maria pressed her hands into her teeth and looked up at her sister. Lourdes’ eyes were stretched so wide Maria could see the whites both above and below the gray-green pupils. She strained to hear, but there had only been that crack, and then silence returned. The breeze filtered past. No, there was motion, the sound of something being dragged, metal across dirt, the slosh of water, and then, unmistakably, the hum of a woman’s voice.

The creak of a door opening again. Maria lifted her palm from her mouth and turned on her knees, crawled closer to the edge of the wall.

“Maria,” Lourdes whispered. “If she catches us.”

Maria ignored her and crept closer. Careful, staying low like a cat, she peered around the wall. From her angle, she couldn’t see anything. The lamb was still there, still eating. Nothing in its life had changed. Maria stood up and crept away from the safety of the shed wall, moving slowly. Slowly the back of the house came into view. The back door was propped open. She had to know what had been dragged, what liquid had sloshed, what the mouth from which the song came looked like. Nina would look, she thought. Nina wouldn’t be afraid.

“Maria,” her sister hissed, having left the shed as well but standing safely back. “Come back here!”

Maria ignored her, waving a hand. She crawled between the two thin barbed wires of the fence without a scratch, having measured the distance between them her whole life. The lamb looked up at her, and then she was standing in full sight of the back door, ten yards away. She moved closed. In the shadows of the house she could see a reflection, sense movement. The woman kept singing. It was a low song, a folk song. It was a song that Maria had heard Nina sing. The sun over the house was blinding her so she couldn’t see what moved in the darkness of the house. She took a few more steps and the roof blocked the sun and she could see. A woman sat in a wooden chair. Her black hair tumbled down her breast into her lap. Her black dress was hiked up to her thighs, falling on either side of their whiteness, and she rested her legs in the silver cajete. She leaned forward, the ends of her hair brushing the floor, and scooped handfuls of water up to her legs, letting it run down them, but what caused the breath to freeze in Maria’s lungs was the woman’s legs from the knees down. They should have been pale white like her shoulders or her neck or her fleshy thighs, which glowed in the darkness of the house, but instead they were red, skinless meat, marbled

pink sinew like the cows Maria's father slaughtered in the fall and hung in the larder, but instead of white fat they ran with rivulets of blood. Maria took a step backwards and a twig cracked beneath her foot, frightening the lamb, which bleated. The woman raised her head.

"Oye," she called.

"I'm sorry," Maria whispered, taking another step backwards.

The woman stood up in the cajete, letting her skirts rain down into the water, concealing her legs.

"Who are you?" she called.

"I'm sorry," Maria said again, turning and running back towards the fence. She slipped between the barbed wire and grabbed her sister's arm, pulling her back towards the shed.

"How dare you spy on me!" Chavela called, and her voice was harmonious even in anger, like liquid silver. "I know you, Maria del Mar."

The girls ran through the alfalfa, leaping over rich rows of soil, their feet sinking into and stumbling over the dirt. Maria's heart was pounding in her chest like a kitten's lifted from a litter. They didn't stop running till they neared their house, ran in through the front door, and straight through to their bedroom, where they collapsed with their backs against the bed.

"What did you see?" Lourdes asked panting.

Maria shook her head. She waited for her heart to stop pounding. There was no explanation, none she could think of, for what she had seen. When finally her breath had returned, she got up to look for Nina. She found her out in the herb garden, wandering between the rows and stooping down to collect sprigs of bright blue flowers.

"Help me, hita," Nina said when she heard Maria approach, not turning to look at her. "I'm collecting borraja for tea."

"Nina," Maria said.

“It helps to cool the body down. The Moors gave it to the Spanish, who brought it here.” Nina went on talking, bent over and running a hand through the flowers. “It’s called *abou-Rach* in Arabic, which means ‘the father of sweat.’” She stood up and handed a bundle to Maria. The flowers smelled strongly of cucumber.

“It can also cure bladder infections,” she said, then paused, studying Maria’s face. “Que te pasa, hita?”

“I saw something.”

Nina tilted her head.

“You went to Chavela’s, didn’t you?”

Maria nodded.

“Andale,” Nina said, shaking her head. “Esta muchacha. Well, what did you see?”

“She had no skin on her legs,” Maria said, and told Nina about the cajete and the bloody, fleshless calves. Nina looked very serious as she listened, her lips pressed together. When Maria had finished, Nina sighed and rubbed her forehead.

“Don’t repeat what you’ve seen to anyone, do you understand?”

Normal evenings after dinner were full of chores. There were dishes to be scraped of food outside for the dogs to eat, and buckets filled with water from the well and heated on the stove to wash pots and pans and seven sets of plates, cups, and silverware. Afterwards Lourdes and Maria did their homework and helped Teresita with hers, while Antonio and Ranger went around in boots and jackets closing animal pens and attending to other mysterious, male jobs outside.

Sundays were different. The girls washed the dishes while Antonio finished dessert—butter mixed with syrup scooped into a warm tortilla. When he was done, he stood up from the table, opened the black iron stove door and, using thick, weathered hands, carefully shoved two dry logs

into the glowing embers. Dulcinea and Nina stayed at the table, plunging their hands into pillows of dough, taking advantage of the heat in the room to make the week's tortillas, but Antonio settled himself on a rug on the floor, his back against the kitchen table's wood bench, and held his arms out wide to his daughters.

"Come here, mi niñas," he said, and they curled up next to him on the ground, Lourdes and Maria under each arm and Teresita in the middle, laying her head against his chest. Maria pressed her nose into the rough pocket of his old corderoy shirt and breathed deeply. He smelled of piñon wood and red chile, smells she loved. What she had seen earlier at Chavela's felt miles away. Nothing could hurt her here. Antonio pulled out his heavy Bible, bound in weathered brown leather, opened it and rested it on Teresita's stomach.

"Tonight we'll read about Tomás, who doubted Christ," he said.

And for an hour, in the glow of the fire, Teresita turning the pages, Antonio read to them. The pages were so thin as to be transparent, and Maria could see both lines of black print, both the ones on the page her father read and the ones behind it, so that they jumbled together like overlapping train tracks. Still, her father seemed to read it without a problem. Like Ranger, he'd dropped out of school when he was twelve to help his father on the ranch, but he read often and carefully. Most evenings, when the day's work was done, he sat at the table reading through two newspapers, one in English and one in Spanish. The English helped him with the ranchers coming up from Texas who hired him as foreman and go-between with the Mexican hands. He didn't trust them though, any more than he trusted the gringo politicians whose actions and words he followed carefully in the news, and he told his children, son as well as daughters, that it was important they stay informed on politics.

"Texans and politicians: two kinds of people you can never trust," he said. "They will try to take advantage of you, thinking you're brown and dumb and uneducated and desperate for their

approval. They'll try to give you contracts to sign that you can't read, or pass laws to take your land away that you don't know about to oppose. So you beat them at their own game: you be better informed than them, you read more than them, you speak English as well as them, and you never let anyone make you feel ashamed for your race. If you can, you get better educated than them, because even if they take your land, they can't take away what's in your head. You stay informed, and you vote. All of you," he would say, pointing a finger at his son and daughters, even little Teresita.

When the story of Tomás was over, he sat with the girls a little longer, one hand resting on Lourdes's and Maria's heads. Maria's chin moved up and down with his breath, and behind them the fire murmured and Dulcinea and Nina spoke together softly. When his own chin began to jerk, he patted their heads, stood up, and disappeared into his room. Dulcinea followed shortly afterwards, carrying the baby, and Maria and Lourdes looked at each other. Now it was time for Nina's stories.

She knew it too, but purposefully stalled, as she sometimes did, going to her room and letting down her hair, humming a song and brushing it out, but leaving the door open. The three girls crept closer, hovering by the door, one by one leaning a shoulder against the doorframe, then putting a foot in the bedroom, then leaning back against the wall. Nina pretended she didn't notice them, just kept humming and brushing her hair, looking at herself in the mirror.

"Nina," Maria finally said.

"Hmm hmm?" Nina responded, not interrupting her song.

"Will you tell us a story?"

"Oh girls, your Nina is very tired," Nina said, sighing and shaking her head dramatically.

The girls looked at each other.

"Please," Lourdes said, and by this point all three girls were crowded around her, brushing their fingers through her long hair and picking up strands of it to pet.

“Why do you want one of your old Nina’s stories?” Nina said.

“Because they’re the best,” the girls said in unison, and they looked at each other hopefully in the mirror.

“Well, in that case...” Nina said, and then her eyes twinkled at them. “Someone bring me my glass of wine.”

“What story do you want this time?” Nina asked, when they were all arranged on the bed. Nina sat with her back against the wooden headboard, and the girls lay with their heads on her lap. In one hand she held her shot glass full of wine, and with the other she stroked Maria’s hair.

“Can you tell us a story about Chavela?” Maria asked. Now in the safety of her house, after her father’s Bible stories, she felt her curiosity return. She wanted to know more. It was the feeling of poking a dead snake, of getting close up to something terrifying and disgusting that could no longer hurt you but still brought a thrill.

Nina narrowed her eyes.

“Maybe,” she said. “Are you sure?”

All three girls nodded.

“It might scare you.”

The girls looked at each other in the mirror.

“Very well,” Nina said, and took a sip.

Some years ago, when Chavela was still a young woman, eighteen or nineteen, there was a man named Nestór. He was half-brother to my cousin Elario and quite a bit older than Chavela, already in his forties, almost an old man. Nestór was married to a woman named Cirila, who was pretty and docile and who had given him eleven children, all of which I delivered myself. The last pregnancy was a very hard one—the baby got stuck inside her—and Cirilia and the baby almost died. It was the worst kind of delivery, where the mother's body almost splits in two like a ship wrecked on a rock, except this rock is one that drives through you, and when it was over, Cirilia's body was broken forever. Nestór loved her as his wife and stayed by her, but he was a man of appetites, like most men are, and after a few months of sitting beside Cirilia's bed, he began to visit Chavela. Chavela lived alone then in that house, and already had one son from a different man. Doña Magdalena had not yet gone to live with her. Chavela's other son, the one with very black eyes, that one is Nestór's.

Now there are rules about visiting women like Chavela. No one likes to talk about them, but Nestór knew them, and the most important two are to not get pregnant and to not fall in love. But Nestór had no self-control, as I said, so he broke the first one, and Chavela was young and passionate and so she broke the second. Chavela is a Pedragón woman in many ways, but her father was a Luna, and their blood runs hot. Chavela will never be as cold and controlled as her mother, and that makes her even more dangerous.

Well, when Chavela fell in love with Nestór, she decided she wanted him to stay and live with her as her husband, which a Pedragón woman never does. She tried to convince him, but he wouldn't have it, even after she had this son, because he was already married to Cirilia, who was weak but still alive. So Chavela, with all the fury and passion of a young woman not yet used to the

disappointments of men, went mad with love and envy—pobrecita, you can't blame her for being angry. And she had a new baby to take care of on top of that, and suddenly Nestór wouldn't see her. After all, he wanted her for the way she made life lighter and sunnier for him, for the perfume she brought to the room, not for the realities of tears and sorrow and new motherhood.

Well, soon after that, poor Cirilia fell ill again and the doctor couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. He wanted to prescribe tests and medicines, but Nestór couldn't afford them and he was too embarrassed to call me. Finally, when she was very ill, he came to me with his tail between his legs and asked me to go see her. Viejo pendejo, I told him, you let your pride get in the way of Cirilia's health. You should have brought her to me first. Much time has been wasted.

I went and examined her and it was clear that someone was trying to do her evil. She was very weak and pale, much more so than she'd been the last time I'd checked on her after her pregnancy. I asked Nestór to show me the basin they used for washing her hair, and sure enough, rolled up at the bottom of it was a hair ball. This was it, I told him, taking the hair out with a stick. When the hair rolled together in the basin, that was the moment they bewitched her.

The situation was very grave, so I gave them very careful instructions. I gave them a tea made from chuchupate root, which heals infections and is also protective, and told her to drink a little every day. I also gave them seven jars of oil, one for every day of the week, and I told them they had to pour them over her body after her bath, using the entire contents of each jar. My last instruction to her was the most important: she could never be out alone. As long as she was with others, she was safe, but as soon as she was left alone, nothing could protect her, not until the maldición was broken. In the backyard, by the chicken coop, we burned the ball of hair.

For several days everything seemed fine, and Nestór reported to me that she was doing better. I went to see her on the fifth day and the color was returning to her skin.

But on the sixth night, just one day before the curación would have been completed, your great-uncle Victor, who lived down the street from Nestór and Cirilia, woke up and went outside to the outhouse. As he was going back inside, around three in the morning, he looked down the road and saw Cirila walking down the road by herself. No one had seen Cirilia walk in months, and she looked as pale and white as a spirit. He went to her and asked her what she was doing out at three in the morning, but she didn't seem to hear him. Victor is a very superstitious man and he was frightened, and of course the whole town new that Nestór had been spending time with Chavela. But nevertheless, he took Cirilia by the hand and guided her back home, and he said she went with him easily, as though she was sleep-walking. When they arrived home he found out that the reason she'd gotten out was because Nestór, idiota, had gone to visit Chavela one last time and left Cirilia unsupervised.

The next day she was wracked by fever and cough, and they sent for me. But when I got there, there was nothing I could do to help them. They hadn't followed my instructions. I gave her a spiritual cleansing so that her soul could be at peace, but there was nothing to be done to save her body. When I went back to see her, just before she died, she was so sick and disfigured that she was unrecognizable. Maria, you were just a little girl then, two or three, and already I brought you with me on many curaciones, but I wouldn't let you come with me to see Cirilia. It was a very sad story.

Sometime after Cirila's death, Nestór remarried, and before long his second wife also fell ill and died. This time they didn't call for me and tried to use the doctors instead, but it didn't help. It was finally after that death that Nestór stopped visiting Chavela, though a few years after that, he was trampled by one of his horses and died also. There was some talk of bringing in the church, or else the police. That was when Doña Magdalena went to go live with Chavela, to try to put some order on her out-of-control passion. No one has seen much of Chavela since then, though a snake is most dangerous when it's curled up in hiding. To rouse it from its rest is to invite trouble, because it

has been absorbing heat from the earth and is strong. Here, mi hitas, tie this bit of chuchupate root around your ankles. It will ward off rattlesnakes if they get close enough to bite.

“It’s late, mi hitas, time for my beauty sleep,” Nina said, when she’d finished telling the story.

The girls climbed off the bed and went back to their room, but as her sisters got under the covers, Maria turned around and walked back to her grandmother’s room. Nina was sitting up in bed, her back to the door, weaving her hair into a braid by the light of a candle on her bedside table.

“Can I sleep with you, Nina?” Maria whispered from the door.

Nina turned her head and looked at her over her shoulder. She smiled and patted the bed beside her. Maria climbed on top and pulled the quilt over her, and she fell asleep with Nina’s thin arm wrapped around her and her gentle snoring in her ear.

At some point in the wee hours they were both awoken by a throaty, echoing whistle from the tree outside Nina’s window. They both opened their eyes, and Nina turned her nose to the air to listen better.

“What is it?” Maria whispered, but Nina didn’t answer.

Then, in a swift motion, she pushed the covers aside and leapt out of bed. She reached under the bed for the basinica, filled with an inch of cold urine from a midnight urge, and pushed open the window.

“Cabrona Chavela, you’re not going to do this to me!” Nina shouted at the owl perched on a branch by the window, nearly hidden by leaves. She heaved the contents of the pisspot out the window, sending a wave of urine over the owl, which took off flying into the night. “Pa que vengas pa sal mañana, cabrona!”

Breathing hard and eyes flashing, Nina closed the window and returned the basinica to its spot under the bed. She pushed her legs back under the covers and pulled them up to her chin.

“How do you know that was Chavela?” Maria asked, blinking wide eyes into the darkness.

“That was her owl,” Nina said. “You watch—if that was indeed her up to some mischief, she’ll be here tomorrow to borrow salt, and we’ll know we have trouble on our hands.”

“What mischief is she up to?”

“She’s letting us know that she saw you watching her, and now she’s watching you.”

The sun was just over the horizon the next morning when they heard a knock at the door. The girls had just finished having breakfast. Lourdes was helping Teresita dress for school, and Maria was dressed and changing Belen’s diaper, pinning the cloth fabric on either side of her chubby hips in her parents’ bedroom. Dulcinea was at the dishes, Ranger was out feeding horses, and Antonio had long since left, before dawn, to the mine. Maria picked up the baby and stood in her parents’ bedroom doorway as Nina opened the front door. There on the doorstep, her face pale and her eyes ringed with heavy purple bags, wrapped in her usual black garb, stood Chavela. Maria hadn’t seen her in the white light of day in years, and she was surprised at how strangely beautiful she was.

“I’ve come to borrow salt,” Chavela said thickly, reluctantly, staring hard at Nina.

“I thought so,” Nina said.

Chavela stayed on the doorstep, hanging her head low and looking up through the folds of her hair at the interior of the house. Her eyes met Maria’s and Maria winced, a flash of cold passing through her. Chavela’s eyes were black like onyx, lined with kohl the way Maria remembered Doña Magdalena’s. Nina went to the cupboard near the stove and reached for the cardboard box of salt. She poured a cup full into a glass jar and carried it back to Chavela, who wouldn’t step into the house but reached a hand in quickly to grab it.

“Would you like to come in for a coffee, Chavela?” Dulcinea said politely, standing behind Nina.

“She knows I can’t,” Chavela answered, looking at Nina.

Nina nodded and Chavela turned to leave.

“Your granddaughter is very good,” she said, looking back at Nina suddenly. She pointed a finger at Maria. “She doesn’t tell what she has seen. I will remember that.”

“Go home, Chavela,” Nina said, closing the door. She turned to her granddaughters, who were all watching from bedroom doorways.

“Keep that chuchupate root I gave you tied around your ankles,” she said.

“What is this business about?” Dulcinea asked, frowning. “Why is Chavela here suddenly, after all those years locked away in her house?” She looked at Maria. “What did you do?”

“I just wanted to see who she was,” Maria started to say. “After the Turca said she would hurt me. Nina says if you know their tricks they can’t have power over you.” She looked at Nina for confirmation, but Nina was looking out the window, watching Chavela’s figure disappear down the road. The glass jar tilted in her hand and left a trail of salt in her wake.

Dulcinea snorted. “Don’t you see how that was nothing but the lies and gossip of an old gypsy? Not a thing she said has come true? Has any letter arrived for you? I will answer that—no. The only thing I hope was also a lie is that you will never be rich.” She raised her hands in a plea. “Please God, let one of my children be rich, so they can be spared all the housework I have to do and can help their suffering parents.” She turned away, back to the dishwater that had already grown cold. “And the last thing we need,” she said, speaking over her shoulder, “are embarrassing relatives visiting us first thing in the morning to take what little we have. So Maria, do your chores, listen to your teachers, mind your grandmother, and stop causing us more trouble. Lucky me it would be if someone would show up to marry you.”

Maria frowned and carried the baby back into the room to finish dressing her. It was true no letters had come for her, though letters arrived once a week at the post office in town. It was her job

to collect them on her way back from school, and though she rifled through them, they were always addressed to her father, concerning business of some sort. Always people making offers on their land, reading their poverty and the fact there were four daughters and only one son as vulnerability and missing the determination on her father's face and the quick and capable hands of her brother. She sighed. Maybe it was true there was no letter coming for her. Maybe she would end up marrying as everyone else did, to some second or third cousin in their town or the town over for whom she would bear children and wash dishes as her mother had. Maybe she would get to be neither the Virgin Mary reborn bringing Christ back into the world nor free and independent like Nina, but rather like any other woman in the San Luis Valley, married and poor and buried under children.

It was a Sunday in September and they were up before dawn to get ready for mass. Under no circumstances did their father ever work on a Sunday, and Maria could hear him in his bedroom praying before the alter on his dresser, his knees cushioned on a sarape folded in the hard dirt and his rough hands clutching a rosary, asking for forgiveness for the sin he was about to commit. She knew what this would do to his mood, how it could bring the foul thing out, but they all knew there was no choice—rain was coming and if the hay wasn't baled and collected soon it would mold and rot, and then there'd be no new clothes for anyone that year and no cow slaughtered, just beans and potatoes through the long months of winter. Antonio had day shifts all week at the mine and on Saturday delivered Mexican laborers to the Anglo ranches where he was foreman, and so Sunday was the only day they could bale before the rain, him and Ranger working all day with the tractor, but only after mass. The women would make a special picnic lunch, fried chicken, potatoes and calabacitas, and take it out to eat as a family. The sisters feared the foul thing coming out but hoped too that he would keep it in check, as he usually did, their father a man of fierce will, and this hope mixed with fear to give them a sense of something exciting and taboo about to happen, a special and exceptional day tinged with just enough danger to create the feeling of an adventure dawning, impossible to imagine. It excited them almost to the point of frenzy. So that morning, as Antonio prayed in his room before the sun rose, Ranger up and out to feed the horses at the sound of their father's voice, in Levi's, boots, and jacket as though he'd slept in them, the girls got dressed with hushed and electric whispers in the dark, Lourdes helping Teresa, pulling on thick tights and buttoning last year's dresses, which tightened at their necks and squeezed at their armpits. Maria went to her parents' bedroom, tiptoeing in her tights so to not disturb her father while he squeezed his eyes shut and mumbled words to the chipped statues on his dresser, Jesús in red, la Virgen María

in celestial blue, and San Jose robed in peeling green. Maria lifted the reaching baby, Belen, out of the crib, wrapped her in a blanket, and carried her into the kitchen where her mother had heated sheep's milk on the stove. By the time the sun's rays filtered over the purple mountain range, they were all dressed, the girls with their hair pulled so tightly back into braids slicked with water that the corners of their eyes tugged into peaks, white stockinged knees pressed together in the back seat of the truck, Dulcinea in front buttoned to the throat in a black wool coat that strained at the chest and hips, a black veil pinned to her hair, the baby pressed to her chest, their father at the wheel and Ranger in the bed, a sheepskin cap to protect him from the wind. They bumped down the dirt road silent and somber, their breath coming out in puffs of steam, past their hundred and fifty acres of tall grasses and dewy, cut alfalfa lying in hazy ribbons on their way into town, the girls trying not to catch each other's eyes for fear of bursting into giggles, Dulcinea sending warning glares through the rearview mirror, all six except the baby with their stomachs properly empty and ready for the papery host. As Antonio parked the truck in the dry dirt lot alongside all the others—all around them men in worn brown suits, cowboy hats, polished shoes, women in coats identical to their mothers and matching lace veils of white or black crowning their heads, jittery children trying to compress themselves inside their ironed dresses and shirts—and they climbed the steps of the baby blue church with the white steeple pocked by pigeon nests in clicking short white heels, the girls' nervous excitement began to morph into something giddier and more panicked. Maria caught Lourdes's eyes as they dipped their fingers in perfumed holy water and both tasted the water, making faces and gritting their teeth, and then tasting again, a game they'd played when they were smaller, until their mother saw them and pinched the underside of their arms. They followed their parents through the incense-filled aisle to the pew third from the front and, sitting in a patch of green and yellow stained-glass light, they pressed their bony knees to the hard wood bench, squeezed their eyes closed and hands together and tried to pray the Apostles' Creed. But as soon as Father Santos lifted his

hands and began to speak with his padded tongue about Christ's forty days resisting Satan in the desert, Maria leaned past her mother and caught Lourdes's eyes. They couldn't help it; the laughter took over, just like when they were small girls in mass. Maria bit her tongue till she tasted blood but couldn't stop, the laughter like a tickle in her stomach that fed on itself. Her chest and shoulders shook from swallowing the sound, and when she looked again Lourdes was the same, her white face a strained red, her hands pushing at her stomach, the new vein in her forehead like a worm with legs. Their father ignored them and Dulcinea pinched them harder, until the priest, halfway through his sermon, stopped what he was saying and, looking at them with very green eyes, said, "Hell is not funny." They caught their breath and with one look, Antonio sent both girls to wait in the cold morning air. Maria followed Lourdes down the center aisle, the eyes of tias and tios and primos following them as they went, and then they stood outside and leaned against the railing and then against the wall of the one-room school building they both still attended. When they got bored, they went around back behind the church and waited, sitting in the dirt, Maria drawing words with a stick and thinking about green eyes, and then hugging their knees to their chests and looking out at the fields of tall grass that stretched on until the creek, bordered by graceful arching trees, and beyond that for miles and miles until broken by the wall of pale blue mountains. The morning was bright but cool, and the brisk air and boredom calmed them some, and finally they pressed their eyes to a crack in the back doors of the church to see to what they were missing. They saw shapes and colors moving, a flash of ivory robe, the glow of a candle. Then they heard the priest give his blessing and the rumble of churchgoers stand, so they moved quickly around front and hid at the corner to watch the doors open and Father Santos emerge. They waited till they saw their father come out, their mother behind him, and then they joined, chastised, in line to shake the priest's hand and say, "God Bless You," in their very best school English.

“I mean what I said,” the priest said when they reached him. “Don’t forget the lesson of Eve. Hell is not funny.” But he shook their hands delicately before turning to their father.

On normal Sundays they would stand around in front of church, the girls running and chasing their cousins when they were smaller, now gossiping together or maybe playing hopscotch while their parents shook hands and gave kisses and discussed the sermon or babies or the price of alfalfa or steers. Then cars would follow cars out to their house or their tio’s house for Sunday breakfast and coffee and cigarettes, and in the evening, work forbidden, don Antonio would read them Bible stories by the stove. But today, mass completed, their father and brother shook hands with the priest, clapped a few other old men on the arm or back, and then went with purpose to the truck.

“We’ll see you at the ranch,” Antonio said.

“With me, girls,” their mother said, and like overgrown ducks they followed her to Tio Ramon and Tia Gloria’s fancy new car and climbed into the back with their cousins. Maria and Lourdes jostled with each other for a window seat and finally settled on Maria crouching on the floor to look out the window too. The car had brown leather seats that smelled like the shoe polish that Tio used to clean the leather and keep it new-looking, and Maria pressed her nose to the back of the driver’s seat because the smell was so pungent and intoxicating. The three heads of the adults bobbed in front of them, their tia in the middle, and because Tio was less serious about God than his brother, he played rancheras on the radio and lowered the windows as they rolled out of the church parking lot and down the dirt road, the sky blue overhead.

“Music on a Sunday,” Lourdes whispered to Maria, her eyes wide, and both girls tossed their heads and rolled the silver window handle further, filling their hair with the mountain air that had heated up slightly with the day. The car was a roar of trumpets, guitar, rushing wind, and voices

shouting over it, and when they bumped over the cattle guard and pulled up in the dirt outside their house, the girls falling over each other out of the car, their giddiness restored.

“They’re so tall,” Tia Gloria said, and then they were all lined up outside the house, giving requisite kisses on the cheeks of their aunt and uncle, thanking them dutifully for the ride home.

“Ready for husbands soon.”

Maria stood beside her sister and watched how Tia Gloria’s eyes passed quickly over her and lingered on Lourdes.

“What nice looking girls you have, Dulcinea,” Gloria said, unconsciously touching her own short hair, burnt into a curl like the movie stars. “But that one is so pretty and fair-skinned. I never thought you could have a daughter that looked like that.

“You know who she looks like?” Tio Ramon said. “My sister, Cristina.”

“She does,” Gloria said, nodding her head approvingly. “Just like Cristina.”

Maria looked at her sister standing beside her. She thought Lourdes looked nothing like tia Cristina, who had such fair skin and yellow hair they called her Tia Güera—her father the Polish doctor Nina had loved—but whose face was long and fine-boned and whose lips were small and thin. Nothing like Lourdes’s, who was smiling at their aunt and blushing, delighted. Lourdes never got tired of being called pretty, and it made Maria want to push her sister’s face into the dirt just to make her stop smiling. But Maria thought Lourdes looked exactly like their mother—just not the brown skin, but same broad, high-cheekboned face, same big bottom lip, and she didn’t know how everyone could look at them and lie about it.

“Vamonos, let’s have a cup of coffee outside while the sun is shining,” Dulcinea said, glowing and indulgent after having her favorite daughter praised. “Girls, go in and help Nina start lunch. Maria take the baby.” She heaved the baby onto Maria and took Gloria by the arm, leading her like a rich woman to the little table and bench her husband had built out front for warm summer

days. A breeze rippled through the big oak trees but the sun warmed the skin, so the three adults pulled their legs over the bench and the girls looked at each other, their mother distracted. They opened the door and pushed each other into the house, stopping just inside to wait for Nina's cue.

Nina, standing at the wood-burning stove, potatoes frying in the skillet, a cigarette burning from her fingers, turned around and took them in with a look.

"Where is your mother?"

"Outside with the tios," they said.

"And your father and Ranger?"

"Already at the ranch," they answered.

"Well," Nina said, ashing her cigarette. "What are you waiting for?"

The girls dug into the cupboard, pulling out aprons, and Nina turned on the radio, a thing never allowed on a Sunday. Lourdes pulled the yellow quilt-like apron with black scalloped ribbon around the edges over her head and helped Teresa tie hers, which was blue with big red flowers dancing up the front. Maria pulled her own over her head, a denim apron made from an old pair of her father's overalls with a big pocket in the front. The kitchen was bright with day light and throbbing with guitar from the radio. Nina went to the window and peeked out, took the pot of coffee boiling on the stove with brown sugar and cinnamon, and the three girls trailed her outside, stalking across the dry dirt yard, Maria carrying three cups and saucers, Lourdes the cream, Teresa the sugar, to the picnic table where the adults sat.

"How long will they be out there?" Maria asked when they were back inside.

"We have some time," Nina said.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I put a little something in their coffee to keep them talking," she winked.

Then she threw the edges of her black shawl back over her shoulders, giving two stomps to the hard wooden floor, and holding up her hands. “Who wants to dance?” she said in English, which she used only when she was playing.

They looked at each other and then at her.

“Quien quiere bailar conmigo?” she said, and the girls all wailed “Yo!” hands up and reaching. Lourdes took Teresa’s hands and Maria grabbed onto Nina’s, and then they were off, twirling around each other, shoes knocking on the rough dirt floor, their skirts and aprons and hair filling with the smells of frying oil and red chili. They danced one song, then switched partners, each taking turns when swung by the stove to stop and stir the potatoes. When the third song was done they stopped, all panting, and looked outside. The adults were still talking, but Dulcinea was glancing back at the house.

“Mi hitas are great dancers,” Nina said, stubbing out her cigarette and patting her hair back into place, and they knew the dancing was over. Somberly they smoothed their aprons down. “Who wants to help me make the chicken?”

They kept the radio on at a low volume and followed Nina out the back door. She threw a handful of corn and the chickens came running, and with a quick strike she grabbed one of them, a fat red one.

“Hand me the string,” she said, and Maria handed her a spool of yarn. She held the chicken to her chest, where its eyes bulged and cast about wildly. She pulled out a length of yarn and wrapped it quickly around the squirming bird’s feet, then dropped the bird so with a flutter of feathers it swung upside down, its wings outstretched and beating. Lourdes set out a stepstool and Nina climbed nimbly up the steps in her short black boots, tying the other end of yarn to a post outside the house. Teresa set a bucket beneath the bird, which flapped and squawked until Nina grabbed it by the neck and ran a blade she pulled from her pocket across its neck. Thick black blood

sprayed out, then splashed, then trickled into the bucket below her as the bird stopped moving.

Nina and the girls stepped back, watching the bird live out its last moments. Nina looked up at the sky where the sun was rising.

“We’ll have lunch ready before noon,” she said.

They were back in the car, this time eagerly, the picnic basket between Lourdes and Teresa in the backseat, loaded with fried chicken, potato salad, calabacitas, and a big, cool, fresh watermelon for dessert. Dulcinea drove the car nervously, her back stiff, and Maria got to sit in the front only because she was holding the baby. Nina stayed home, saying she had a headache.

They bumped along the dirt road that led away from town, along the wire edges of their ranch, for miles, until in the distance they saw the old green tractor and the two small figures atop it, one jumping on and off to poke around or kick something on the ground. Dulcinea pulled the car over to the grassy shoulder, and the four women carried the food and blankets and a pitcher of lemonade across the wide stretch of cut alfalfa towards the tractor. The ground was rough and pocked with gopher holes and Maria had to watch her step to keep from tripping. In one direction the faded green strips of alfalfa had been sucked up and spat out into identical, neat bales, fading smaller and smaller into the distance, while in the other direction the ribbons stretched to the horizon.

“We made chicken!” Teresa called, running towards their father, who stopped the tractor and looked down from on high. The girls had changed out of their church dresses into old pairs of Ranger’s Levi’s, which also made it a special day. Maria liked the feeling of the rough fabric on her legs. She would have worn Levi’s every day if they were allowed to.

Antonio clambered down from the tractor and wiped his brow. His face was strangely red and strained, his forehead lined. He reached for the pitcher of lemonade that Lourdes carried.

“I’m very thirsty today,” he said. He drank long and hard and then pushed at his chest.

Ranger kicked at the bales they’d just finished with the tip of his boot, bending down to check them, unnecessary but never missing a chance to show his sisters how important he was, doing things they couldn’t. Both men looked tired and red from the sun, though. She knew they’d been working hard. Maria handed the baby to her mother and flung out a pair of blankets for them to sit on.

Dulcinea, nervous, said. “We made those potatoes you like, Dad, and some calabacitas, too. I hope they turned out good. You boys need some food. Oh, I hope it’s good.”

Their father didn’t respond, just took another drink from the lemonade, his forehead damp with sweat. Dulcinea’s brow creased watching him. Maria knew her mother lived in fear of displeasing him.

Plates were passed around, fried chicken with thick, dark brown coats that left fingertips glistening fished from the pot, scoops of potato salad dished out by Teresa proudly wielding the big spoon. Maria leaned her head on her father’s shoulder, which he kissed, then pushed her away, breathing hard. She looked at him, worried. She could see his chest heaving, and he kneaded it with one hand.

“You’re sweating a lot, Dad,” she said.

He shook his head and reached for more lemonade.

“I’m just very thirsty.”

Then he gripped his chest, his face twisting further. Everyone scrambled up, sending plates and chicken flying.

“Let’s get him to the car,” Dulcinea shouted at Ranger, pointing to the road.

Ranger was up in a leap, and he and Dulcinea shouldered Antonio, panting, his face so red it was almost purple. The girls grabbed the blanket, the lemonade, each other. They all helped him into

the backseat of the car, where he knelt on the floor, gripping the seat, his head down. Ranger, who'd been driving since he was a boy, got behind the wheel, Dulcinea with the baby and Lourdes with Teresa on her lap next to him. Maria climbed into the back, gripping the back of her father's hand. The sweat ran off his face in streams, like someone was pouring water over his head. She'd never seen anyone sweat like that. She unbuttoned her shirt and took it off, using it to try to keep his face and eyes dry.

"Maria!" her mother said from the front, but Maria ignored her. She couldn't even feel her own skin exposed.

"To the doctor," Lourdes said. "He can call an ambulance from La Jara."

Ranger didn't say anything, his eyes on the dirt road. Dust flew up around the car as he pressed his boot to the gas. Maria tried to give her father more lemonade but he shook it away. His lips mumbled and she realized he was praying.

"Dad is praying," she said to the car. "Pray, pray, pray." They all started murmuring along with her father, the Hail Mary. The car became a chant, Hail Mary, full of grace, in time with the pounding of the wheels on the gravel. Maria's lips moved automatically as she held her shirt to her father's forehead.

It took twenty-five minutes, but they were in Ortiz, pulling up in a flurry of dust in front of the doctor's house. His wife, Anglo but nice, ran out, waving her hand.

"He's not here," she cried. "There was another heart attack in San Antonio. You'll have to take him to La Jara yourselves." The nearest hospital in La Jara, thirty minutes away.

"Can't you do anything?" Dulcinea pleaded, but the doctor's wife shook her head, holding up her hands.

Dulcinea looked at Ranger.

"Go," she said, and he started to pull the car around.

“Dad is saying something,” Maria said. She leaned down closer to her father. His face was still contorted, the lines in his face so deep he suddenly looked old. His hands, which she still held, shook violently.

“Church,” he said.

“You’re crazy,” Dulcinea said.

“Church,” and his face contorted again.

There was silence in the car for a moment as Dulcinea looked at Ranger, and then he put the car back into gear and turned the opposite way down the street from La Jara, towards the blue church. Maria’s shirt was soaked through, so she doused it with lemonade to keep it cool and held it back to his head.

“Help,” Antonio said through gritted teeth when they pulled up in front of the church.

Ranger and Dulcinea pulled him out of the car and, each taking an arm, they carried him up the steps into the church. Maria followed.

“Crazy man,” Dulcinea wailed.

The church was silent, not a person inside. Antonio gestured towards the holy water and dipped shaking fingers in to cross himself. He pointed towards the small house on the side of the church where Father Santos lived, and they helped him back out and around. Ranger knocked and Father Santos cracked the door and then opened it wide. Maria had never seen him out of the priest’s frock. He was in normal clothes, pants and a long shirt. He looked like a normal man.

“Don Antonio!” he said. “What’s happened?”

“Confess me,” Antonio murmured.

The priest breathed in and then opened the door wider. Nearly half an hour went by before it opened again.

“He insisted on receiving last rites,” the priest said, his forehead creased.

He helped them carry Antonio to the car.

“You girls wait here,” Dulcinea said to Maria and Lourdes. “Take Teresa and the baby. Ranger and I will go. Padre can take you home.”

Maria wanted to protest, but she saw the look on her mother’s face, took the baby from her and got out of the car. The girls watched the car jerk out of the church lot and back onto the road, and then Maria felt Lourdes’s arm around her. The sisters held each other, pulling Teresa in as well, all three around the baby, who was also crying, though no one had noticed.

Father Santos drove them home somberly, asking a few times how they were, but Maria stared out the window, watching the wild grasses float past, healthy and green from the heavy winter snows they’d had. When they arrived home, Nina came outside, seeing the priest’s car, and pulled the girls to her. She brought them inside and made coffee with cinnamon for their stomachs, but Maria couldn’t drink hers. She sank down to the floor by the window, crossing her legs and holding her knees to her chest.

It was past dark when the car pulled up in front of their house. Maria’s head jerked up at the glare of the lights in her eyes. She’d fallen asleep with her shoulder and temple pressed to the wall. Nina had boiled water with mint leaves for the cajete and had made Teresa and Lourdes climb in to soak, and now her sisters were both asleep in their beds.

Ranger opened the door and helped their mother, who looked shrunken, like an old woman, into the house. Maria pushed herself to her feet.

“Is Dad okay?”

Dulcinea looked at her, her eyes hard and her face lined. She shook her head.

“It was massive. They say he’ll have to be in the hospital for a week, maybe more. He’s very weak, but alive.” Ranger helped her sink onto the wooden bench at the table.

Maria felt the air in her lungs again. She noticed how cold it was in the room and shivered.

“Gracias a dios he’s okay, Mamí,” Maria said. She wanted to hug her mother’s legs, to lay down on the floor at her feet. Nina appeared from the bedroom holding a rosary.

Dulcinea looked at her. “This is your fault,” she said. “Always provoking Chavela. Can’t leave well enough alone.” Then her gaze shifted to Maria. “And your fault too, for your sin with that gypsy. I knew it would come back to us.”

Nina shook her head too.

“Go to bed, Dulcinea,” she said. “Don’t take this out on Maria.”

Dulcinea put her hands to her eyes and started to cry.

“Come on, Mom,” Ranger said. “To bed.”

Dulcinea did as he said.

It was ten days later that Ranger and Dulcinea drove their father home from La Jara. Ranger helped him into the house and into bed. The doctor had prescribed him a heavy dosage of valium, five tablets to be taken daily, and forbidden him from working. Nina pursed her lips and shook her head at the little vials of pills, which Dulcinea set on the wooden bedside table.

While he’d been at the hospital, Ranger had been out on the ranch every day to finish baling, had even taken Maria and Teresa out with him and shown them how to use the tractor to help him. Lourdes had wanted to go too, but he’d told her to stay home and take over caring for the baby, and his word, now, was final.

As Ranger helped their father into bed now, the girls standing nearby, he raised a shaky finger to the window, pointing at the bales.

“I got them all done, Dad,” Ranger said. “But I don’t know how I’m going to collect them. I’ve got the girls helping me, but you know how much those bales weigh.” His fifteen-year old body was still slight; he couldn’t have weighed much more than one of those bales himself.

Antonio closed his eyes.

“The men in town. Tio Ramon.”

“He’s got a bad back,” Ranger said. “And all the young men are gone, you know that. All that’s left are the viejos, the sick, and little girls.”

Antonio closed his eyes again. “Rain is coming.”

“Let your dad sleep,” Dulcinea said. “Stop bothering him with business.” But her face was worried. She ushered everyone out of the room, but Maria stayed behind, sitting in a chair by the dresser holding her father’s altar. She watched his face sink into nothingness as he fell into the deep sleep of medication, and after she’d studied the deep lines in his forehead, the spots on his sunken, pale cheeks, the gray hairs interspersed with black in his bushy eyebrows and the dark stubble around his jaw, she studied the statues, the paint chipped around their eyes and hands and at the edges of their robes. She would paint them for him, she decided. After a while Antonio started to tremble, his eyelids fluttering, and he began to protest in grunts and murmurs, his hands shaking and pulling at the bedcover.

“Dad,” she said, touching his shoulder.

He opened his eyes weakly. They were clouded, the pupils large and black.

“I’ll never work on a Sunday again, I promise, Maria,” he whispered. “Please forgive me, please forgive me, please forgive me, oh Virgen,” he kept repeating, as large tears ran down his cheeks. Maria held his hand, not sure if he was speaking to her or to the Holy Mother or confusing them with each other. When he fell asleep again, she crept quietly out to the garden to collect a bundle of romero. A thin sliver of moon had begun to rise. She brought the fresh herbs back to his

room and brushed them over him, circling the bundle around his head, and then lifted the edge of his pillow carefully and to lay the herbs there in the shape of a cross. No one came to bother her to help with chores, and finally she fell asleep too, her stomach empty and her face pressed to the cold mud wall.

“Maria, come look,” Lourdes shook her awake. Maria opened her eyes to the room lit by morning. She’d slept all night in the chair in her father’s room. Her mother must have taken her spot with her sisters, or slept on the sofa. She stood up, her neck sore, and followed her sister to the window. It was early, the sky still gray with clouds the sun wasn’t warm enough to burn off yet. As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she realized that the fields outside were filled with men, and trucks of all colors, blue and red and black. Men in Levi’s and hats were lifting bales and tossing them into the beds of their trucks, shouting and calling to each other in Spanish. Maria spotted her brother’s small, lithe frame out with them, could see him turning his thin, fine-boned face from man to man, pointing, giving directions.

“Who are they?” Maria whispered.

“Dad’s friends from the mine,” Lourdes said. “They showed up this morning at dawn.”

“How did they know?”

“Word got out, I guess.”

Maria looked over at the bed. Antonio was laying there, his eyes open, looking out the window. His face was expressionless, and she wondered if through the fog of valium he knew what was happening. But then he looked over at her, and his eyes were heavy with something that looked like sadness.

Life changed rapidly after Don Antonio came home from the hospital. He stayed in bed for four weeks, too weak to even push back the covers. Once he could leave the bed, he wandered the house from room to room, looking out the windows at his fields. The valium dosage was heavy. Six pills a day, the doctor prescribed, for the pain. His eyes were permanently dilated, and thick, heavy pockets filled up beneath them. His skin turned dark gray. He slept for large parts of the day, deep heavy sleeps punctuated by sudden screams and violent tossing, his memories of war resurfacing to haunt him. In the dark dreams of his hallucinogenic sleep he returned to the trenches, curling into the fetal position, his hands clasping his rosary, his dry and cracked lips mumbling the Hail Mary over and over, until something in the dream would startle him and he'd throw both hands to his head, clutching it and shrieking. He'd wake up panting wildly. He began wetting the bed. It was in those first months after the heart attack that his hiccups returned. He'd had hiccups when he'd come back from the war, Maria knew. Her mother said that when she married him his hands had shaken so badly that he'd had to drink whiskey to still them and had hidden them under the table at meals. In the years since, with the stability of farming and family life, his terrors had faded below the surface, but the violence and pain of the heart attack had brought them back with a shock at the fear of death, the fragility of life. At the transparent fibers that separate one from the other. The doctor increased his dosage to eight pills a day.

Every morning he got up and dressed, putting on his boots, fastening his trousers with a belt buckle, dressed for work, ready, but like a caged animal he stalked the house, watching from the windows, his side-hairs askew and suddenly gray, his eyes as round and metallic as an owl's following the small, distant figure of Ranger as the boy tried to run the ranch. He sputtered, shook his head, muttered under his breath, knocked at the window glass when Ranger was close enough to shake his

head, point at the mistake, mime how to do it better. Sometimes he pushed the window open, and if neither Dulcinea nor Nina was nearby to stop him, he'd run out the front door shouting at his son.

“What are you doing, pendejo, estúpido, fucking moron!” he'd shout, gesturing at the heavens, before being overtaken by a coughing fit, clutching his chest, and someone would appear to escort him back inside, give him his pill and force him to sit or return to bed. His frustration and anxiety condensed itself into a hard dislike of Ranger, though no one was spared. Before the heart attack, Maria had never heard her father curse. Nina had been the one to giddily swear, but now Don Antonio cursed everyone and everything, cursed his own reflection in the mirror.

“Cabron de mierda, this is what you get, you're gonna lose it all for your family,” he said, pointing a finger at himself in the mirror, the stub of the ring finger pointing at him too as though he was doubly charged. “Pinche pendejo, you better figure something out.”

They went on four months like this, the girls trying as best as possible to stay out of his way. Ranger had Lourdes and Teresita out with him every day, feeding, watering, chopping, tending. The girls were taken out of school for a time. Maria became fully responsible for the baby and also took over the cooking, learning quickly how to fry potatoes in manteca, blend dried red chili pods with water and then stew them on the stove with chunks of pork, move her wrist fast enough to beat egg white and yolk together for tortas de huevo, all while carrying the baby on one hip. To make up for the income they lost from Antonio's job as foreman and while he couldn't resume work at the mine, Dulcinea took in ironing from her tias and other women in town and Nina cleaned house for Tia Gloria. No one had much money to spare and everyone did it as a way to help the Valdezes out of the respect they held for Don Antonio as he had been. They were grateful and ashamed, and no one more painfully so than Antonio.

The storm cloud finally broke on Maria's thirteenth birthday. It was February, the coldest month of the year, minus forty at night, and the ground outside was buried in a layer of snow so

thick and alive that if you fell through the hard top layer the rest of the snow would rise up and cover you, pulling you under like a frozen lake, and you would lie prisoner until the spring thaws came to reveal your burial place. It was so cold that the horses grew thick coats on their backs and huddled together for warmth and the cows rotated themselves in a circle, each taking a turn in the middle. Maria was in her parents' bedroom changing Belen. She fastened both sides of the cloth diaper with safety pins and then pulled thick tights over the baby's bottom, standing her on her feet and holding the baby's chin to her shoulder. She set her back down and ran two fingers like a spider up Belen's chubby leg and to her belly, then back down the other leg, and the baby giggled delightedly. These were the quiet pleasures that were still left. She pulled a long-sleeved shift over the downy-hair on Belen's head and then a warm knit dress over that, humming one of Nina's old songs. She heard the front door open and a rush of frigid air swept into the house. Ranger, back for lunch. She sat the baby back down on the bed to put her little stockings on, but then she heard a clatter and a burst of shouting. She picked up the baby and ran to the doorway just in time to see her father lift a painting—the Sacred Heart—off the wall and swing it, frame and all, at Ranger's head. Ranger ducked. He was sixteen now, suddenly tall as their dad, but still slight of frame, skinnier now that he was working on the ranch twelve hours a day.

“Dad!” he cried, ducking again as their father hurled the painting at his head. It crashed into the wall, the glass shattering and the wooden frame splintering and fell to the floor. Their father was already seizing another painting from the wall and coming after Ranger, swinging it to the right and the left. Ranger dodged him, moving around the furniture.

“Idiot!” Antonio shouted, spittle flying from his mouth. “You're ruining my ranch!”

“Dad!” Dulcinea cried from the other side of the room, her hands at her mouth. She went after him, pulling on his sleeve to stop him, but he shook her off, throwing the next painting at Ranger's head, sending it crashing to the floor, and casting about for something else to throw.

“You are not my offspring!” he shouted over and over again. “Your slut of a mother whored herself out and gave birth to some other man’s spawn! No son of mine would do as lousy a job as you! Out of my house! Out of my house!”

He had grabbed the iron fire poker and gripped it in both hands, pausing for a minute, satisfied with its weight. A mad light was in his eyes, which shone black in the fire, wide and wild like an animals. Dulcinea sobbed in a corner.

“Stop, Dad, please,” she cried.

Ranger backed into the wall, holding a hand out, looking around for help.

“Dad, please,” he said. “Come to your senses, please. It’s me, Ranger, your son.”

Maria stood frozen in the doorway watching the scene in horror. She picked up the baby, pushed the door shut, prepared to throw her weight against it if her father came after them next. She pressed her eye to the crack in the door, watching her father advancing with the poker like a deranged fencer, a glint in his eye, a grin on his mouth.

A sudden loud bang, a deafening clap, split the air like the Heavens had cracked. Maria felt her heart stop, squeezed her eyes together, and when she opened them she half expected to see the ground split and smoldering from a heavenly lightning bolt. Instead what she saw was Nina holding a pistol, the pistol from her petaquillas, the barrel smoking. She pointed it upwards at the ceiling where a round hole seethed. The rest of the room had frozen where they were, staring at her, even Antonio, though he still held the poker.

“Enough,” Nina said. “I think we have all had enough.”

Antonio looked from her to Ranger, who was still cowering against the wall, and lifted the poker again.

“Uh uh,” Nina said, pointing the pistol at him. “I have no desire to shoot my own son, but there is a diablo in you my boy that we need to get out.” She gestured with the pistol to the floor.

“Set the poker down now, Antonio, there on the floor.”

He hesitated, watching her. The pupils in his eyes were still wide and black but they showed more sharpness and alertness than they had in months.

“Come on, now,” she said, her voice careful and even. “I’m speaking to the diablo now, not to my son, who you’ve left very little of. If to save him, I have to kill you, I won’t hesitate, and I think you know that.”

Some of the rage faded from Antonio’s face and his body seemed to wilt. He let his arm drop and the poker fell to the floor. Maria closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to the baby’s head and let her breath out.

“Maria,” Nina called. “Come on out with the niña. I am putting your father to bed.”

Maria pulled open the door and edged around the room. Ranger had sunk to the floor in a crouch and had his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking. Dulcinea, her face streaked and splotchy, took the baby from Maria.

“Crazy, crazy man,” she muttered, holding the baby tightly.

Teresa and Lourdes, who had been watching from the doorway of the other bedroom all the while, both of their faces pale and drawn, went to their mother.

Nina took Antonio, who suddenly seemed frail and old, by the elbow and led him into the bedroom. She closed the door behind them and Maria paused at it, wondering if she should go in and help her grandmother. She could hear Nina muttering things in Spanish, knew she would be brushing herbs over his head, making him lay face down in the bed and rubbing his shoulders and arms and back, pushing the bad energy down to his feet where she would draw it out of him. Maria raised her hand to the door, about to knock or push it open, but then stopped herself. Her hand was shaking. What she wanted at that moment was not to help her father, or her mother, or the baby, or even Nina. What she wanted to was to breathe the freezing afternoon air, to feel for a minute free

from her family and their insanity and their needs. It made her bad, she realized. It made her disobedient and ungrateful, choosing herself like this, but sometimes, she realized with a jolt, she was bad.